THE

saint

DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

JUNE

35c

Edited by LESLIE CHARTERIS

The Harmonica Mystery
by P. G. WODEHOUSE

The Smell of Dead Men
by SAX ROHMER

The Poetical Policeman
by EDGAR WALLACE

Murder With Flowers
by Q. PATRICK

Reprieve at Eleven
by FREDERICK NEBEL

THE ROMANTIC MATRON
A NEW SAINT STORY by LESLIE CHARTERIS

SOME OLD, SOME NEW — THE FINEST IN MYSTERY FICTION

A KING-SIZE PUBLICATION

I WOULD hate anyone to think I'm getting soft; but there are times when even I, schooled as I am to make noises like a hardened editor, find it hard not to purr over the variety of talents I am privileged to bring together.

How many different ways are there of telling a detective story? Let's jot down a few:

The Gay Sophisticated: A very bright and chic young couple tackle a murder mystery which begins in a Stork Club type of setting, and wherever it goes from there is bound to be dizzy, dazzling, and diverting. Okay; page that reliable entertainer Q. Patrick, and let him do it again through the medium of Mr. & Mrs. Peter Duluth in our lead novelet, MURDER WITH FLOWERS.

The Straight Scotland Yard: Who ever did it better than the great Edgar Wallace, one of the few British writers who never treated professional policemen as dolts or clowns—who even made romantic heroes of them. Whose inventive fertility was so exuberant that he created and sustained in various series not just one character (like some of us lesser men) but a dozen. Mr. J. G. Reeder was only one of these, but he is at his best in THE POETICAL POLICEMAN.

The Suspenseful-Subtle: In this category we have uncovered a real collector's item. THE HARMONICA MYSTERY is by P. G. Wodehouse—but you will have a job to identify the hilarious Wodehouse whom you may be more familiar with. Small wonder, for he wrote this many years ago; and we think some literary history might have been changed if he had stayed in this field.

The Weirdie-Eerie: Who (as if we had to ask) is the best known exponent of this genre? Sax Rohmer, of course. His Dr. Fu Manchu is almost as familiar a name as Sherlock Holmes. Much more of a connoisseur's discovery is his character of Moris Klaw, a quaint creep whom we are proud to introduce in THE SMELL OF DEAD MEN—which happens to be the first in a series by this unchallenged master of the macabre.

The Modern Hard-boiled: Which isn't as modern as some of you neophytes may think. Way back in the 30's, a magazine called *Black Mask* developed a school of writers who polished a new detective-story style on the steel wool that they grew on their chests. One of its ruggedest discoveries was Frederick Nebel, and in REPRIEVE AT ELEVEN he demonstrates that graduating to smooth paper hasn't put lace on his pants.

The Saint: Well, you must indulge me if I put him in a classification of his own. But if you can shunt THE ROMANTIC MATRON under any other heading, I may offer you my job.

Possibly we have had a better issue, but I can't remember when.

Leslie Charteris

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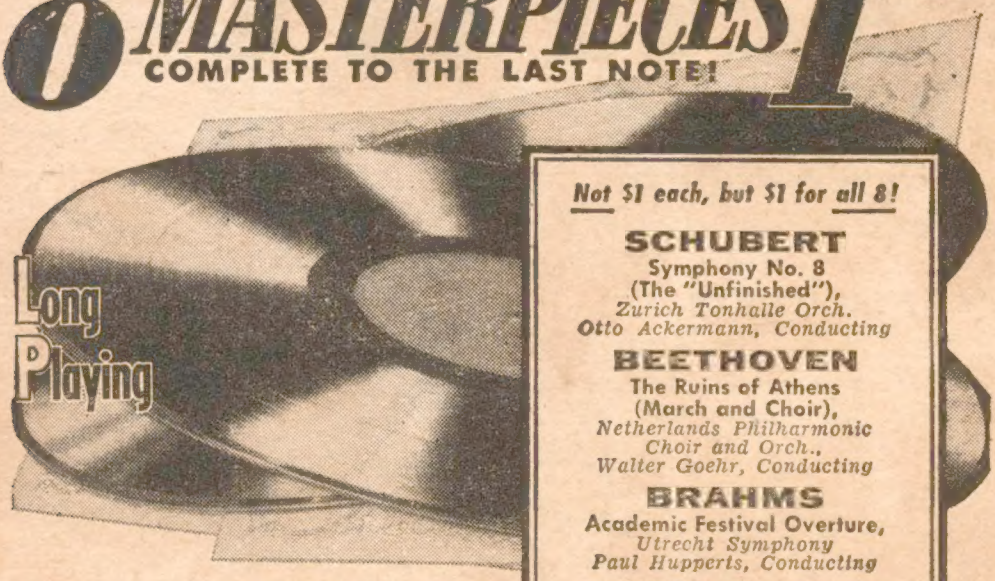
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H. L. Herbert
President

Leo Margulies
Publisher
Editorial Director

Leslie Charteris
Supervising Editor

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the romantic matron

by . . . Leslie Charteris

To Simon they stood out vividly in the Hall of Lost Footsteps. The woman was radiant, the man— Then crime's lightning struck!

SHE HAD probably celebrated at least thirty-five birthdays, but most of them must have marked pleasant years. Now she was entering the period of life at which the sophisticated European, impervious to the adolescent fixations with which Hollywood has helped to pervert the American taste, finds a woman most attractive. She could approach it with the confidence of a figure that had ripened without ever being allowed to get out of hand, a face enhanced by the distinction of maturity, and the kind of clothes and grooming that it takes experience as well as money to acquire.

She said, in a quick breathless way: "You're Simon Templar, aren't you? The Saint. One of the croupiers at the Tropicana told me."

"Did he warn you not to play cards with me?" Simon asked disinterestedly.

"Silly. I'm Mrs. Carrington. Beryl, to be friendly. That's all the introduction I can manage."

"How do you do," he said, with restrained courtesy.

She looked over her shoulder nervously, then back to him

AMIDST THE GAYETY AND SPARKLE OF FABULOUS HAVANA THE SAINT UNMASKS A KNAVE IN A BOLD NEW ADVENTURE.

again. "I'm not drunk," she said. "Please believe that. We've got to have help, and I thought you might be It."

The Saint inhaled expressionlessly through his cigarette. It was getting to be a job for an electronic computer to count the number of times he had heard some similar opening to that. And "help" usually meant something basically unlawful, with a good chance of getting shot, or clapped in jail, or both, as the most obvious reward.

Which was perhaps why he had had to learn to draw a mask over the glints of purely juvenile devilment that always tended to creep into his eyes at such inspiriting prospects.

"What's the matter?" he inquired patiently. "Did you lose your husband, or are you trying to?"

"Please be serious. I've only got a moment."

He had all the time in the world, but he had been toying with the preposterous whimsy that he might be able to spend some of it in Havana without any of the things happening to him that seemed to happen everywhere else.

He flicked over in his mind the other times he had seen her. Because of course he had noticed her, as she had noticed him.

The first time, two days ago, in the Capitolio Nacional.

Simon Templar would not ordinarily have been a customer for a piece of conducted sightseeing, especially of a government building, and least of all one which from the outside promised to be just another version of the central-domed design which has become the architectural cliché of the Capitols of the New World.

But a taxi driver had mentioned that set in the floor under the dome there was a diamond worth $50,000, and this he was curious to see. After all, although the days were somewhat precariously past when he would have been thinking seriously of stealing it, he did not have to forego the intellectual exercise of casing the job and figuring out how it might be done.

That was the only reason why he happened to be one of a small group of tourists shuffling through the *Salon de los Pasos Perdidos,* listening with half an ear to the recitation of the guide (*"The Hall of Lost Footsteps . . . largest in the world . . . four hundred feet . . . Florentine Renaissance style. Please notice how the pattern of the ceiling is exactly reproduced in the tile on the floor . . ."*) and then gawking up at the immense symbolic gilt figure of The Republic (*"The biggest indoor statue in the world . . . the spear alone weighs a ton . . ."*) and finally clustered with them around the small roped-off square in the cen-

ter of which was the diamond (*"Bought with the contributions of everyone who worked on this building . . . It marks the exact spot from which all distances in Cuba are measured. When they say it is a hundred miles to Havana, and you wonder what part of Havana they mean, this is the place . . . It has thirty-two facets, the same as the number of points of the compass . . ."*)

But you had to take the guide's word for it, for all you could see was a small circular brass grating set in the floor with a pane of glass under it, through which you could only imagine that you saw a diamond.

So the Saint let his gaze shift idly over the faces of his fellow tourists, and the one that arrested it was Mrs. Carrington's. Hers first because it was notably easy to look at on its own merits; and then in conjunction with and emphasized by the face of the man with her, who kept a possessive hand under her arm. For just as she was unmistakably a visitor, with her Nordic features and coloring, the man with his well-oiled black hair and olive skin and rather long-nosed good looks was no less obviously a Cuban.

The oddity, of course, being that you would never normally expect to find a native of Havana among such a typical clutch of rubbernecks. He didn't look a day older than the woman, which left just enough room for cynical speculation to impress them both on the Saint's memory.

Simon found himself dawdling towards the rear of the sightseeing party as it was ushered out of the building, being vaguely inquisitive about what the couple might reveal in the manner of their departure, and saw them get into a new Mercury that was parked outside. It had Indiana license plates, but the man drove it.

And shortly after that Simon would probably have let them disappear into the limbo of all fruitless surmises. But before he could forget them, he saw them again.

The second time, the night before, at the Tropicana.

The Tropicana claims to be both the biggest and the most beautiful night club in the world. It is indeed enormously big; and its fine weather auditorium, roofed only by the sky and colonnaded with glamorously lighted palm trees, is certainly quite a sight.

But in spite of the spectacular advantage of a backdrop of living trees interlaced with spidery stairways and catwalks over which the chorus was able to make endless dramatic entrances, countermarches, and exits, the floor show was tremendous without much leavening of inspiration, and Simon was finally glad to vacate his seat at the bar and

edge his way laboriously through the crowd to the Casino. And there she sat at the roulette table, with the same man standing behind her chair.

The Saint's analytical eyes observed that she played without strain, moderately disappointed when she lost, reasonably elated when she won, but always relaxed enough to exchange a smiling word now and then with her companion. Therefore her luck was not financially important to her.

He also noted that her stakes were quite modest; and that, combined with the knowledge he already had that her car was not the most expensive make on the market, suggested that she was no more than comfortably well off, without the astronomical kind of bank balance that one automatically associates with such extravagances as gigolos. Could it then be a more genuine romance? There were well-heeled men in Cuba, too, and she was undeniably an attractive woman.

But he saw her pick up a small stack of chips and offer them to the man, clearly urging him to play with them; the man shook his head in firm but amiable refusal. Then they both seemed to feel the Saint watching them, and looked at him, and he moved away. It could never be any great concern of his, anyhow—he thought.

Until now.

The croupier had nodded to him as he passed, he remembered, saying helpfully, "Not going to Puerto Rico this winter, sir?"—and the Saint had shrugged with affable vagueness and moved on before he placed the man, but realized that they must have seen each other across a table somewhere in San Juan. So it was probably true, that that was how Beryl Carrington had learned his name.

But now she had introduced herself as Mrs. Carrington; and it was at least certain, for the record, that a man with the looks of her steady companion could not possibly be Mr. Carrington.

It could well have seemed like a stretch of coincidence when the Saint strolled in to the Bambú that night and found himself seated two tables away from them. Yet the Bambú, billed as a typically Cuban night spot, was just as ineluctably as the Tropicana on the itinerary of any tourist who was stubbornly determined (as the Saint had been) to find out, regardless of the trauma to his pocketbook and eardrums, exactly what was the legendary fascination of Havana.

But this time they had seen him at once, and turned to each other as unanimously as if their heads had been geared together, very evidently to talk about it.

Simon had tried his best to suggest innocence of any intention. Perhaps almost too studious-

ly, he had kept his gaze from returning even approximately in their direction. And so now she was sitting beside him, asking for some nebulous kind of help.

It could do no more damage to look towards her table now, so he did, and saw that her boy friend was no longer sitting there.

"He went to the men's room," she said. "I can't say much now, because I don't want him to catch me. I'm not sure he'd like it."

"Shouldn't you have found that out before you risked getting a knife stuck in me?" Simon murmured.

"I'm staying at the Comodoro, Mrs. Carrington. Will you call me tomorrow? Any time. Please." Again her eyes took a furtive glance around, and then they came back to him with an entreaty as urgent as the breathlessness of her voice. "Please, please do. I must go now."

And before he could make any answer she was back at her own table, completely absorbed in the manipulation of mirror and lipstick. Her entire absence had been so brief that anyone who had not been watching her like a hawk might never have noticed that she had moved at all.

Simon Templar managed to look equally nonchalant as he took a long pull at his drink.

The orchestra, which had been mercifully silent during the bare minute that Beryl Carrington's visit had taken, splintered the ephemeral lull with a blast of saxophones hurled full blast at the microphones which Cuban musical taste requires to be placed only inches away from the loudest sections of any orchestra. And in another instant a typically tuneless bedlam of brass was in full frenzied swing, amplified to bone-bruising intensity through the battery of souped-up loud speakers which Cuban custom demands for disseminating music through even the smallest room, and pounded remorselessly home with an assortment of drums, cymbals, rattles, gourds full of dried seeds, and just plain pieces of wood beaten together.

Under the impact of that jungle cacophony magnified to the maximum intensity attainable through the abuse of modern electronics, the Saint found it relatively easy to keep his face a blank. In fact, about all he had to do was to let it mirror the numbness which the blare and concussion was threatening to induce in his brain.

But out of the corner of his eye he saw Mrs. Carrington's playmate return to their table, and speak to her without sitting down. She stood up, and they moved on to the dance floor and wedged themselves in among the dedicated crowd who were wriggling and jostling through the motions of a rumba or samba or

mambo or whatever the current terpsichorean aphrodisiac was being called that season with every appearance of enjoyment.

About that time Simon Templar decided that he never was likely to experience for himself the mystic rapture which is evoked in some persons by Afro-hispanic minstrelsy. Something in his cosmogony had undoubtedly been lacking from birth, and he decided to get out while he still had a few other faculties left, before the stupefying din left permanent scar tissue among his brain cells.

He had to escape from that paralyzing pandemonium to be able to make up his mind about Mrs. Carrington's peculiar invitation anyhow, and there could be no more inconspicuous time to do it than while she and her dancing partner were submerged in the gyrating mob in front of the bandstand. He succeeded in catching a waiter's eye, and made the pantomime of scribbling on the palm of one raised flat hand which is understood to request a bill anywhere in the world.

As he emerged into the relative quiet outside, the doorman and three loitering drivers vocally offered taxi service, but they were physically cut out by a broad butterball of a man who half encircled the Saint's back with a brotherly arm and grinned: "I got the best car for you, sir, and the best price."

For just long enough to let himself be steered diagonally across the driveway into the parking lot, Simon submitted tolerantly to what seemed to be merely the effective technique of the most determined salesman on the beat. Then as he realized that they had gone just a little too far from the entrance, and a corner had shut them off from the sight of anyone there, the man stopped and turned him quite violently, and Simon looked down at the gleam of a knife-blade in the gloom.

"How long do you stay in Cuba, *señor?*" asked the man.

"Only as long as I can stand the noise," snapped the Saint.

The fat man's teeth flashed in the same dim light that glinted on the steel in his hand. Even at that distance the music was so loud that it must certainly prevent anyone around the entrance of the club from hearing almost anything that might happen in the parking lot, short of an atomic explosion.

"I think you will go home tomorrow," the man said, "if you don't want to get hurt. People don't like you to spy on them. You are just a nuisance."

"Well, Pancho," said the Saint judicially, "speaking purely on the spur of the moment, I should say you were just a horse's ass."

And then, as the fat man's

patronizing grin vanished, he moved with a speed that the other, for all his apparent professionalism, could never have allowed for. The fat man himself could never reconstruct exactly what happened. He only knew that a blow out of nowhere sapped all the strength from his fingers, and that the knife he dropped was caught in mid-air almost as he released it and presented point first at the tip of his own nose.

"Go back to the goat who sent you," said the Saint, in fluent Spanish, "and tell him that it annoys me to be rushed. And when I am annoyed, I do things like this."

The stout man flinched from the flash of metal across his eyes as the knife spun away into the night. And then a fist that felt no less metallic, although blunter, impinged crisply on his nose and sat him down suddenly in his tracks with a new constellation of lights zipping across his vision. Before he could clear his involuntarily streaming eyes, the Saint was no longer in sight.

In a taxi heading back towards town along the Rancho Boyeros highway, the driver said helpfully: "You no have a girl tonight, sir?"

"Not tonight," said the Saint.

"You are smart guy, I think. Some women you find make much trouble . . . But if you like, if you are lonely, I have young cousin, very honest and beautiful girl—"

"Thank you," Simon said. "But I think someone just got an option on me."

II

"You see," Beryl Carrington told him, "Ramón is one of the top men in the Underground."

"Oh," said the Saint; and now for the first time he did begin to see a little.

She jumped up restlessly, with a swirl of the clinging negligee that she had put on when he knocked.

"It's exciting, and rather frightening—isn't it?—to think that things like that still have to go on, and so close to the United States."

"Sure," he said. "But how does it happen to concern you?"

She stared at him, puzzled and almost hurt. "If I hadn't heard it, I wouldn't have believed that the Saint asked that question. Isn't the fight for freedom, anywhere, something that concerns all of us these days?"

"I know the oratory," Simon said mildly. "I meant—why you, personally?"

"I got into it when I met Ramón."

"Where did you meet him? Here?"

"Yes."

"What part of Indiana are you from?"

"Why, is the accent so obvious?"

"No, but your car plates are. Excuse me if I sound like a district attorney, but I like to know just a few things about the people I'm supposed to help."

"I understand." She sat down, facing him. "Prewisburg, Indiana, is the place. Probably you've never heard of it, it's a very small town. I was born and raised there, and I lived there all my life. This is the farthest away I've ever been. I married my high school sweetheart, who was also the heir to the biggest industry in town—an umbrella factory. You don't look like a man who ever owned an umbrella, but if you had one it could easily be a Carrington. They're very good umbrellas.

"My husband was a very good guy and a good husband—and just as dull as an umbrella. We had a good, comfortable, normal, and very dull life. Until he died of a good dull case of lobar pneumonia a couple of years ago. It wasn't until I got over that that I realized how very ordinary and how very dull my entire life had been. I wasn't left filthy rich —that wouldn't have been ordinary, would it?—but I could afford to go anywhere within reason. So I decided to see a few places while I was still young enough to have fun. Does that tell you enough?"

Simon nodded, and poured himself another cup of coffee—she had been having breakfast in her room when he arrived, and had ordered a fresh pot of coffee for him.

"And here you just happened to meet Ramón."

"It wasn't exactly that kind of pick-up," she said.

Beryl Carrington had been told by a travel agent that if she wanted to see more of Cuba than the city of Havana where all the tourists go, it would be cheaper to have her own car ferried over from Key West. She had faced the prospect of trying to find her way around in a foreign country with some trepidation, but had finally decided to let it be an adventure.

By the time she reached her hotel after getting lost five times on her way from the dock she was wondering whether that kind of adventure could possibly be worth any economy it effected; and a call on the house phone that came to her room while she was still unpacking convinced her that she could only have fallen for the idea during a spell of mental incompetence.

"I am very sorry," the caller said, "but I have had a little accident to your car."

Ramón Venino, as he introduced himself with a card in the lobby, was very apologetic and very embarrassed. She was too upset at first to notice how very personable he also was.

"My hand slipped on the wheel—but that is no excuse. I was careless. I wish to take all responsibility."

They went out together to the parking area to inspect the damage, which consisted of one moderately crumpled fender.

"It is only a little less bad because it is easy to fix," Venino said. "Give me the key, and I will take it to a garage, and tonight I will bring it back like new."

Very quickly and sharply she visualized herself waiting from then until Doomsday to see either him or her car again. She was distinctly pleased with her own poise and perspicacity.

"Thanks," she said. "I'd rather take it to a garage myself."

He inclined his head. "As you wish. The hotel manager will recommend a place. I only insist that I pay the bill."

After she had been directed to a garage, and was faced only with the navigational problem of actually finding it, she found Venino waiting beside her car with a taxi.

"Tell the driver where you are going," he said, "and he will lead the way. He speaks good English, and he will help you at the garage. Then he will drive you where you want to go for the rest of the day. Don't pay him anything—it is all taken care of."

He bowed, and left her before she could think of anything to say.

The next morning, however, she recognized his voice when it spoke on the house telephone again.

"Please don't be annoyed that I have brought your car back myself," he said. "I only wish to be sure that you are completely satisfied with the repair before I pay the garage."

The fender had been so well smoothed out and repainted that it would have taken a magnifying glass to find fault with it. And the fact remained that Venino had apparently had little difficulty in persuading the garage to turn the car over to him. If he had been a car thief with a new angle, as her hypertrophied caution had at first suspected to be, he could already have gotten away with his objective.

"It looks fine," she said.

"I can only apologize again for the inconvenience," he said. "I am sorry we could not have met in any other way, so that I could have hoped to see you again without you thinking bad things of me."

It was her turn to feel awkward and embarrassed.

"I think you've been very charming," she said. "If everyone who had an accident was like you, the insurance companies would be out of business."

"You are very kind. But still

I have made it impossible for me ever to ask you to dinner."

His manner was studiously correct but disarmingly wistful, and his good looks were finally able to make their impression on her.

"Don't be silly," she said. "Why not ask me, and let me decide how I feel?"

He had given her the most enjoyable evening she had yet spent in Havana, and had distinguished himself further by not making a single premature pass. Therefore she had no excuse for refusing to let him drive her around sightseeing in her own car the next day—which prolonged itself painlessly into another dinner together, and thus into another project for the following morning. And so on.

Almost from the first evening she began to notice odd things about him—the way he would stop and look carefully up and down the street every time they came out of a building, a trick of glancing back over his shoulder at unexpected moments, his phobia about taking any table in a restaurant where he could not sit facing the entrance and with his back to a wall, the continual restless wandering of his eyes. By the third day she had no hesitation about asking him why.

"And so he told you," said the Saint.

"I suppose it was easier for him, since I was a foreigner, so at least he could be pretty sure I wasn't already on the other side. And we'd become very good friends very quickly. You know, that can happen."

Simon nodded. "What is he afraid of?"

"You forget, it's really a dictatorship here. And Ramón is one of the people who are trying to get rid of the Strong Man and bring democracy back. You know what would happen to him if the Secret Police caught him?"

"I'm afraid I haven't been following Cuban politics too closely," Simon confessed. "However, what's the program for getting rid of the Strong Man? A fine rowdy revolution, or a nice neat assassination?"

"Neither," she said with some spirit. "Ramón and his friends aren't gangsters. You can't build a lasting good government on any kind of violence. And it isn't necessary, either. The majority *wants* freedom, as they do in any dictatorship. They're just held down by one small group that's well organized and has all the key positions. So the Underground is organizing too, and they'll just arrest that group all at once, the same as a surgeon would remove a growth, without chopping the patient up with an ax."

"It sounds frightfully humane and tidy," Simon remarked. "South American revolutions were a lot more fun when I was

a boy. So time marches on . . . Well, when is this change-over set for?"

"Very soon now. It might be almost any day."

"If it's all so efficiently organized and ready to roll so soon, I'm still wondering why you so desperately need me."

She stood up again, as if the springs of repressed excitement would not let her relax. "They're afraid that there may be a traitor in the Underground."

"Aha."

"And if there is, he might know that Ramón is the only man who has a complete list of all the members. You see what that means? If Ramón was arrested by the Secret Police, everything would be lost. He's sure that they'd never get a single name out of him under any torture" —she shuddered—"but if they got the list, all his courage wouldn't make any difference."

"I'm beginning to appreciate this lad Ramón," said the Saint. "The list, I gather, isn't in his head."

"Of course not. It couldn't possibly be. There are thousands of names and addresses on it. Naturally there *has* to be one key list like that; but can you imagine the responsibility of trying to keep it safe?"

Simon regarded her steadily. "Looking at you," he observed thoughtfully, "I gather that it makes you pretty jittery."

She stared at him, her eyes widening and her mouth falling open. "I didn't say—"

"No, you didn't say it, darling. But my brain is beginning to work. Obviously, Ramón has asked you to take care of this list."

She brought her lips together again with a shrug of resolution. "All right, that's it. I'm leaving tonight, and I'm to take it back to the States with me. I can put it in a safe deposit box in Miami until Ramón needs it, and the Secret Police can't do anything about that."

"But you're scared about getting it there—is that it? You've been seen around with Ramón too much. If he's already being watched—which you don't know —then you may be suspect yourself."

"Ramón thinks the odds are on my side. As an American who's never been here before, they ought to believe I'm . . . well, just a passing romance. But I can't help thinking and thinking about the other possibility. Suppose they *don't?*"

"You've got something to worry about."

"So that's why—when I saw you for the third time running last night—and by that time I knew who you were—it seemed like an omen. I had to ask you for help." In her intensity she was completely sexless, either because she scorned such wiles or

because nothing in her background was consonant with the use of them; yet for that very reason her appeal was stronger than any siren could have achieved. "Please, will you?"

"Yes," said the Saint calmly.

She slumped against the wall, twisting her hands together.

"I feel so stupid and small," she said. "And I was so excited at first. Coming here, and meeting a man who turned out to be a real hero like Ramón, and winning his confidence. And then having the chance to do something really important for the first time in my life—something truly dangerous and romantic, like most people only read about. But when it came right to the point, I found I didn't have what it takes.

"It wasn't only being scared of how I'd react to being arrested, or—or the things they might do to me. It was thinking of the thousands of other people whose lives I'd be responsible for. And I found out I was in a blue frozen funk, all through my insides . . . You must despise me."

"Anything but. I'm glad you had the sense to know when you were out of your depth, and the guts to admit it." The Saint's brows lowered over a passing thought. "Ramón spotted me last night, too—I saw you speak to each other about it. What did he say?"

"He didn't like it. I told him it must be a coincidence, and you couldn't possibly be against him, but he was worried. I tried to tell him what everyone knows about you, but I don't know how much I convinced him. That's why I still haven't told him I spoke to you."

Simon lighted a cigarette. "All right. Where is this list now?"

"It's in one of my suitcases. He left it with me last night."

She hesitated a moment, and then went and opened a suitcase which stood on a trestle in a corner. She turned over a few folded pieces of clothing and brought out an alligator briefcase.

She came over to the Saint with it, and he took it.

"What's the opposite of a nightmare?" she said. "It's the word I need for the way it feels to know I don't have to think twice about trusting you."

"The word you're thinking of may be 'pipe-dream'," he said sardonically.

The briefcase was brand new, so that the leather bulged stiffly over the bulk that it contained. It was equipped with a lock which Simon recognized as being much more resistant to amateur picking than the average run of such hardware, although of course it had no defense against a sharp knife in the hands of anyone who was not bothered about preserving its virginal appearance.

"I'd suggest you go on packing, and let Ramón think this is still in the bottom of that suitcase—then there won't be any argument," said the Saint, and got to his feet. "By the way, when are you seeing him again?"

"He's coming here at one o'clock, for a farewell lunch—or I suppose you'd say, an *hasta la vista.* He has to bring my car back, anyhow—I let him take it home last night after he brought me back, because his own car is in the shop having an overhaul."

The Saint's very clear blue eyes searched her face with disconcerting penetration. "You think a lot of this guy, don't you?"

"Only because of what he's doing, and what he stands for," she insisted. "I'm not a middle-aged sugar-mammy who came here to look for a Latin thrill. You mustn't believe that."

"I don't," he said soberly. "And most especially the 'middle-aged' part."

He stubbed out his cigarette and turned towards the door.

"Thanks to the discretion ingrained in me by a miss-spent youth," he said, "I got out of my taxi two blocks away, walked over to the beach, wandered into the back of this *posada* by way of the swimming pool, and ambled up a service stairway. If any Gestapo gunsels do happen to be watching you, I don't think they saw me coming and I don't think they'll see me leave."

"But where'll I see you again?" she gasped, in a sudden panic.

"If you don't know, nobody can make you tell. But I'll find you. Don't worry." He grinned, and tapped the briefcase under his arm. "Whatever happens, I shall be holding the bag. Remember that."

He had already started down the service stairs when he heard other footsteps coming up. It was too late to turn back, for whoever was coming up would have turned the corner of the half-landing and seen him before he could have retreated out of sight, and his abrupt reversal of direction would have looked guilty even to someone who was quite unsuspicious.

And there was no reason why the feet could not belong to innocent guests of the hotel or its equally inoffensive employees. Simon kept on going, with his reflexes triggered on invisible needle points.

They were two men in dark suits, with a certain air about them which to the Saint was as informative as a label. They looked at him with mechanical curiosity, but he held his course without faltering, and they fell into single file to let him go by. He passed them with the smile and carefree nod of a tourist who had never consciously noticed a

policeman in plain clothes in his life.

As he reached the foot of the stairs, the voice of one of them came down to him from the floor above, speaking low and tersely in Spanish.

"Hide yourself here, and take note of anyone who comes to visit her."

III

Out there in the Miramar district where the Comodoro Hotel is located, Havana's Fifth Avenue (which, like Manhattan's Sixth, has been officially re-christened "Avenue of the Americas," and is just as stubbornly known only by its old name to every native) is far from being the city's busiest thoroughfare, and as he reached it Simon was wondering if he would have trouble finding a taxi.

He did not want to be wandering around the streets of that neighborhood for long, where not only might the plain-clothes men he had already encountered decide belatedly to investigate him, but Ramón Venino might come driving by from any direction en route to his rendezvous with Beryl Carrington.

He need have had no anxiety. He had barely taken one glance up and down the street when a taxi, drawn by the uncanny instinct for prey that achieves its supreme development in the vulture and the Havana taxi driver, made a screaming U turn and swooped in to the curb beside him.

"Where to?" asked the driver cheerily, starting off without waiting to find out. "Are you hoping to meet a girl, or is your wife here with you? I have a young sister, a lovely girl, but very naughty, who is crazy for Americanos."

"I have a weak heart," said the Saint, "and the doctor has ordered me to leave naughty girls alone."

"Some sightseeing, then? I can take you to the Botanical Gardens, then to the Cathedral—"

Simon frowned at the briefcase on the seat beside him. Wherever he went, its pristine newness would be conspicuous; and to walk into his hotel with it in full view, where either policemen or friends of the man he had called Pancho might be watching for him, would be too naive to even consider.

"How about one of the rum distilleries?" he suggested.

"Yes, sir. I will take you to Trocadero."

Presently they drew up beside a large low building, at an entrance with sliding doors designed for trucks to drive through. The driver waved aside the Saint's proffered payment.

"I will be here when you come out."

Simon stepped into the odorous interior, and was adopted at once by the nearest of a number of men who stood waiting by the entrance.

"Good morning, sir. This is where we make that famous Cuban rum. Step this way, please." They entered one corner of a vast barn-like factory. "The sugar cane is pulped in that machine there, and then the juice is fermented in those tanks over there. Then it passes through those stills which you see there, and the rum goes into those barrels to be aged. Now this way, please."

They passed through another door into a large room conveniently at hand, where there were several tables already well populated by other visitors concluding their research into the manufacture of rum. "Here we invite you to sample our products. Sit down and be comfortable—there is no hurry."

Each table was provided with stools on three sides and a long row of bottles on the fourth. Simon's guide went behind the bottles and at once became a bartender, rapidly pouring samples into an inexhaustible supply of glasses, as other guides all over the room were already doing for their personal protégés.

"This is our light rum, this is our dark rum, this is our very best rum. Don't be bashful, it's all on the house. These are our liqueurs—apricot brandy, blackberry brandy, crême de cacao. Have whatever you want, there is no limit. And you should try our special exotic drinks—banana cordial, pineapple cordial, mango cordial. You are allowed to take back five bottles with you free of duty. Would you like some of our Tropical Punch, or some Elixir, or a frozen Daiquiri?"

"I'll take five bottles of plain drinking rum," said the Saint, sipping very judiciously. "But I want 'em in one of those fancy baskets that you give away."

"Of course." The man whipped out a pad and wrote the order. "I'll get them for you right away. Help yourself to anything you want while you're waiting."

Simon moistened his tongue experimentally, out of academic interest, with some of the more unfamiliar flavors; but he was in no mood, as most of the students of distillation around him seemed to be, to take memorable advantage of the phenomenon of unlimited free drinks. He was not even interested in the rum he was buying, except as much of it as would be suitable ballast for the container it would come in.

The guide-salesman returned promptly, bearing a sturdy straw bag of the kind in which every island in the Caribbean makes a trade-mark of packaging the homing tourist's duty-free quota of the local brew. Simon paid

him, picked up the bag along with the briefcase which he had brought in with him, and went out to look for his driver, who had expected to rack up a nice hunk of waiting time and was disappointed to see him so soon.

"Take me to the Sevilla-Biltmore," said the Saint.

He quietly removed the paper-wrapped bottles from the straw bag, and put the new alligator briefcase in.

"Do you drink rum, *amigo?*" Simon inquired.

"Sometimes," said the driver indifferently.

Simon handed a bottle over the back of the front seat. "Put this away for when you feel thirsty," he said.

"Thank you, *señor,*" said the driver, much more brightly. "Did you enjoy the distillery?"

"It was most educational," said the Saint. He passed over another bottle. "Take this one home to your sister, the lovely and naughty one, with my compliments and regrets."

"I thank you for her," said the driver earnestly. "She would certainly be crazy for an Americano like you. It is a great pity your heart is not just a little stronger. She can be most gentle, too."

"It would be a privilege to die in her arms," Simon said gravely, "but it might be embarrassing for you both."

The three remaining bottles, replaced alongside and overlapping the briefcase, adequately concealed it and left the straw bag bulging just about the same as before.

"I will wait for you," said the driver, as Simon got out in front of the hotel.

"Not this time," Simon told him firmly. "I may not go out again today at all."

He let the distillery basket be snatched by a determined bellhop, and followed it up the steps to the lobby after paying off the cab.

"What room, sir?"

"Can you keep it down here for me till I check out?" Simon asked, and added for the conclusive benefit of anyone who might be listening. "I don't want to start drinking it up before I get home."

The bellhop took the bag to the little store room behind the bell captain's desk, and gave him the stub of a tag. Simon gave him a quarter in exchange and strolled casually away towards the elevators. But as he reached the elevator alcove he swung briskly to his left around a group of visiting firemen and turned off again down the little-used passage to the side entrance on the Prado. But it was not too little used for there to be a taxi waiting outside, and Simon was in it before the driver had time to deliver more than the first four words of his sales talk.

"The Toledo," the Saint said.

"If you want a real good restaurant," said the driver, "let me take you to—"

"I have to meet someone at the Toledo—and," Simon continued rapidly, to forestall any further suggestions, "she happens to be a young and beautiful girl."

This was the purest fiction; but he had nevertheless picked the Toledo for a reason. He had eaten well enough there once before, and knew it to be a small quiet place that made relatively little effort to invite the tourist trade. He thought that he might have done a fair job of throwing any possible followers off his scent for a while, and he did not want to show himself in any of the places where the bloodhounds would most naturally go sniffing first if they were trying to get back on his trail. At least he would like a chance to enjoy his lunch, and a breathing spell in which to sit still and think.

He ordered a dish of Moro crab, that big-clawed delicacy who manages somehow to be just a little more succulent down there than his brother the stone crab of the Florida keys, and a *paella Valenciana,* and said: "One other thing—do you think you can find a newspaper lying around anywhere?"

"I will see," said the waiter.

Simon lighted a cigarette and sipped a glass of manzanilla, and began to take a few things apart in his mind.

Just as positively as the two men he had seen at the Comodoro were of the police, the man he had called Pancho was not. Simon had yet to meet any kind of police, even Secret Police, who threatened people with knives. And if the short fat man had had any kind of authority, the Saint would never have got away with punching him in the nose. Simon had made no effort to disappear that night, and it wouldn't have taken a determined search very long to locate him among Havana's relatively few hotels.

But by the same token it wouldn't have taken Pancho's mob much longer to do the same thing, if they had any sort of organization.

Simon had assumed that Pancho was under the orders of Venino. Had Mrs. Carrington's argument, then, finally convinced Venino that the Saint meant no danger to him, and had Venino called Pancho off?

That was what Venino might well be hoping that the Saint would believe. But the Saint didn't believe it for one moment. To believe it, he would have had to accept two or three much greater improbabilities that he simply could not buy.

There had to be some other explanation that would tie everything together; and whatever it

was, it could only be as illegitimate as a prostitute's daughter.

The waiter brought the Moro crab claws, and with them a slightly rumpled copy of *Información.*

"*Lo siento,* it is all we have. But if you like I can send out for a Miami paper."

"No, this is what I wanted." Simon looked at him with a lift of the eyebrows that was as expressive as it was calculated. "But do you mean to say that you can get Miami papers at any newsstand here?"

The waiter's surprise was manifestly unfeigned. "Yes, why not?"

"Even if they say rude things about the President?"

The waiter shrugged. "What President is not criticized somewhere, *señor?*"

"Do you ever criticize him?" Simon asked.

"I do not argue about politics," said the other cheerfully. "It is like religion. It is easy to offend someone and very hard to convert anyone."

"But you aren't afraid that if you said what you thought you might land in the *juzgado.*"

The waiter looked honestly puzzled. "What would the President care what a poor waiter said?"

"Then you aren't looking forward to a revolution," Simon said.

The waiter laughed. "I hope not. Revolutions are bad for business."

The Saint let him go to attend to another table, and proceeded to read the newspaper with unusual assiduousness while he ate, fervently hoping that he would not be interrupted.

For once he was uninterested in any international events, but he read every line that had any reference to local affairs. And although he did not skip any political items, he was most hopeful of finding the missing link that he needed under much more sensational headlines. A major jewel robbery would have suited him very well—or, as a supreme refinement of plot construction, it would have been almost deliriously intoxicating to read that some ingenious sportsman had actually contrived to steal from the Capitol the diamond across which he had first set eyes on Beryl Carrington and Ramón Venino.

But nothing as poetic as that rewarded him—in fact, the only important larceny he found mentioned was an armored carload of bullion which seemed to have recently vanished somehow between the Banco Insular and the Treasury, which the police were still looking for. And even if some Underground of self-convinced patriots had pulled that caper, it certainly was not hidden in an alligator briefcase.

Suddenly the Saint realized

that it no longer made sense to be so coy about that briefcase.

He watched the waiter place beside his coffee cup the complimentary glass of coffee liqueur topped with cream which is the custom of the country, and said: "You have converted me, *amigo*. I have decided against the revolution. My bill, if you please."

"Si, señor."

Fifteen minutes later he was at the Prado entrance of the Sevilla Biltmore again, this time on his way in. He turned immediately towards the elevators, and caught one that was just about to start up. Out of an ingrained habit of preparedness he had his key in his pocket and had not needed to go to the desk for it, and there was nobody lurking around his landing that he could see as he let himself into the room. He went straight to the telephone and called the bell captain.

"Have the goodness to send up the bag of rum which I left down there," he said, and gave the number of his claim check.

He hung up, and as he did so he heard the sound behind him, though it was no more than the faintest scuff of fabric or the catch of an over-restrained breath. But it made the difference that he was turning as the blanket fell over his head, and the man who threw it did not clamp him quite solidly in the bear-hug that was meant to pinion it over his arms.

Another pair of arms clutched him around the knees in the next instant, and he was lifted off his feet and being carried swiftly across the room, he could feel the direction and an involuntary chill went through him, but he went on squirming and lifting his elbows outwards and freed his arms enough to drive one fist after another into something that sobbed and yielded. The grip around his shoulders weakened, and he brought his knees up towards his chest and kicked out again savagely and felt his heels crunch satisfyingly against flesh and bone, and then he was free and falling only a little way to the floor.

The blanket fell off him as he thrashed up, and he saw that he was right beside the open window and in another moment no doubt would have been falling out of it. A queasy horror in his stomach transformed him into a bolt of berserk lightning that completed the annulment of the two men who would have done it to him before they could comprehend the catastrophic extent of their failure.

The big man who had thrown the blanket, who was still bent double over what the Saint's punches had done to his midsection, took a kick in the face that dropped him in an inert heap; and Pancho the fat boy,

who was holding his ribs with one hand and bringing out his switch-knife with the other, only felt the first of the two teak-like fists that bounced his head off the wall until his folding knees took it down below easy reach. . . .

Simon Templar stood breathing slowly and deeply, and gradually became aware of a prosaic but persistent knocking on the door.

He walked over to it, past the open closet where he realized Pancho and his taller pal must have been waiting for him, and flung the door open. A bellboy with the rum basket in one hand stared at him and then beyond him with bulging eyes.

Simon took the bag from him before he dropped it, and acknowledged the two facsimiles of corpses on the floor with a deprecatory gesture.

"They attacked me and tried to rob me," he said casually. "Send for a policeman to take them away, *por favor.*"

The lad turned and scooted away like a startled rabbit.

Simon sat on the bed and picked up the telephone again. While he waited for the operator to answer, he extracted the briefcase from under the bottles in the bag.

"The Hotel Comodoro," he requested.

Reaching out a long leg, he raked Pancho's knife across the floor towards him and picked it up. He held the telephone between his ear and his hunched shoulder while he turned the briefcase over and inserted the point of the knife delicately into a seam.

"Mrs. Carrington, please," he said to the Comodoro operator.

It was like a cue for background music when she answered almost at once.

"Beryl," he said, "this is Simon Templar. Just answer yes or no. Is Ramón with you?"

"Yes," she said. "I just finished packing."

"Pretend I'm your travel agency checking with you. Does he still think you've got the briefcase?"

"Yes. I'll be driving straight to New York, and then probably going to Europe."

Simon gazed down at what the briefcase had spilled into his lap through the seam he had slit open. It was nothing but an old Havana telephone directory.

"Don't move from there, and keep Ramón with you," he said. "Tell him I have to verify your engine number before I can get you a boarding pass for the ferry. Don't try to argue. The click you hear will be me taking off."

He put the phone down in its bracket and was on his way.

IV

He went down a back stairway which he had taken note of

the very first time he left his room—it was another habit he would probably never lose, that in any new surroundings he automatically and unconsciously observed the alternative and less obvious exits.

The police would inevitably ride up in an elevator; and even though he might never have a better chance to play the outraged innocent victim, he would inevitably pay for it with an involvement in red tape that might keep him tied up for hours, and he figured that that could wait. The police would catch up with him soon enough now.

Pancho and his big brother had caught up with him, after all. In a hotel with the Grand Central atmosphere of the Sevilla Biltmore, no one would have noticed them going up to the Saint's floor; the old-fashioned lock on his door would not have delayed them for more than ten seconds. And, but for their grievous miscalculation of his superlatively vigilant senses and tigerish fighting power, no one would have noticed them leaving after the Saint had become a splash on the pavement seventy feet down from his window.

So for a little while he could give a shocking surprise to anyone who was relying on the efficiency of Pancho and Pal.

He slipped through the service crypts of the hotel without encountering anybody but one belatedly perplexed *camarero*, and with no trouble found a door that let him out into an alley lined with garbage cans, and thus in a few more steps he was on a side street looking for a taxi, and as usual there was a taxi waiting for him.

In her room, Mrs. Carrington put down the phone and said: "That was the travel agency. They have to send someone over to verify the engine number of my car so I can get a pass to go on the ferry."

"Is that all?" Venino said. "You looked so troubled, I thought it was something serious."

"It's just a nuisance."

"It will be all right." He frowned. "But it seems so foolish. They could check your engine number at the dock."

She shrugged. "Anyway, the agency's taking care of it. But when your people take over, you should make them fire all the bureaucrats who invent stupid regulations. Just think, you could go down to history as the man who created the first government in the world to abolish red tape."

"What I am doing is nothing to joke about." He spoke so roughly that it was like being physically pushed aside.

"I'm sorry."

"Forgive me," he said quickly. "I am on edge. I am more

afraid all the time that something is going wrong. Those men . . ."

When Ramón Venino had arrived and called up from the lobby to announce himself, and she had left her room to go down and meet him, she had quite accidentally looked directly at a face that was looking directly towards her through the two-inch opening of a door at the end of the corridor. It was more discomfiting because the man did not move or look away before she did, apparently believing himself invisible, and she could feel his eyes on her back all the way to the elevator.

Then, when they went to the bar for a cocktail, there was a man in a dark suit who followed them in; and when they moved to the terrace outside for lunch, he came out immediately after them and sat down a few tables away. There he was joined presently by another man in a similar dark suit, the two of them having none of the seaside vacationing air of the other guests, and the two put their heads together and kept looking at her and Ramón as they talked.

And though the glimpse she had had upstairs had been far too narrow for positive recognition, she felt utterly certain that the second man was the one who had been watching when she left her room.

She had hesitantly asked Ramón what he thought of them.

"I'd already noticed them," he said. "Did you ever see two more obvious detectives?"

She told him about what had happened upstairs.

"It looks very bad," he said grimly. "He was not watching you, of course, but watching for me. I am still sure you have nothing to fear. Because you are leaving, they will not believe you are important. But I think you are going just in time."

"But if they're watching you, it means you've been betrayed."

"Perhaps not so badly. We do not know who our traitor is—or we should have dealt with him. So we do not know how much he can betray. Perhaps very little. Then the Secret Police would not know enough yet to arrest me; they would only be watching."

"But then it's only a question of time—"

He nodded, tight-lipped. "I begin to think that everything may have to be postponed. For a while only, but at least until they are off guard again. And I shall go abroad—then they will be certain that I am not in mischief. I could not be organizing a revolution on the Riviera. Would you like to go there?"

"If you'd promise to meet me there, I'd go."

"I must think about it," he had said.

Now, two hours later, he strode to her window and stood

gazing out unseeingly, with his hands gripping nervously together behind his back. Finally he said: "Yes, *querida,* I have decided. When I heard you say on the phone just now that you might go to Europe, I knew it was right. Will you think me a coward if I go?"

"Oh, no, Ramón! I want you to be a hero, but you wouldn't help anyone by throwing your life away."

He turned to her and kissed her hands.

"Then it is settled. You will drive to New York, as you said, and book a passage on the first good boat. You will take your car for us to drive around, because it is much newer than mine, but of course I will pay the expenses. I shall book myself on a plane in about a week, so that I do not seem in too big a hurry, but I shall be there in France when you land."

"You don't know what a load you've taken off my mind," she said; and yet as she said it she felt inexplicably as if something else had been taken from her also.

He glanced at his watch. "We should have your bags taken to the car before they want to charge you another day for the room," he said practically. "We can wait downstairs for your travel agent."

They went downstairs together with her luggage and watched it stowed in the trunk of her sedan. Venino tipped the bellboys and dismissed them.

Beryl Carrington felt a strange vague uncomfortableness as they faced each other alone again, with nothing to do but kill time and nothing special to talk about. Nothing, that is, except something most personal. Everything else had been wrapped up so quickly and finally. But right up until then, the kisses he had recently pressed on her hands were the nearest approach to emotion there had been between them.

In the beginning she had been charmed and relieved by his correctness. But she had always been convinced that at the proper time, when it could be done without crudity and disrespect, his attentions would become warmer. It could not be any other way, with such a romantic enterprise binding their lives together. Yet now that he could scarcely avoid making some declaration about themselves, she found herself desperately unready to receive it.

He took her hand and drew her towards him. "You must not worry about me," he said, and a flutter of pure panic suddenly shook her.

"Why not?" asked the Saint's coolest and most languid voice. "I'd say there was a whole lot to worry about."

They turned like two marion-

ettes jerked with the same string.

Beryl Carrington's startlement was at first almost grateful—until her eyes fell on the briefcase that Simon carried, and grew round with blank dismay.

But Ramón Venino's face turned yellow with the sickly anemia of a skeptic who for the first time believes that he is seeing an incontrovertible ghost. And then, as he too saw the briefcase, his eyes literally jolted in their sockets as if he had been hit behind the head. And the Saint strolled closer, around the side of the car which had concealed his silent approach.

"As a one-man revolution," he remarked, "I'd say he was a lousy actuarial risk."

Venino put forth a colossal effort that dragged his congealing stare from the briefcase to Mrs. Carrington.

"What is this?" he demanded hoarsely. "I thought—"

"Yes, I gave it to him," she said with sudden assurance. "I was afraid you were gambling too much on the police thinking I wasn't important. And I've told you all about him. He promised he'd get it to Florida for me."

"And if you insist," Simon said earnestly, "I will. I'll even get you a police escort for it."

As though they had only been waiting to explode that boast, the two men in dark suits whom Mrs. Carrington had temporarily lost sight of materialized from between other parked cars and hurled themselves at the Saint in a coordinated rush that had one of them clamped on to each of his arms before Mrs. Carrington fully grasped what was happening. But the Saint seemed only inconsequentially put out.

"You're grabbing the wrong guy," he said, without struggling.

One of the dark-suited men turned to Mrs. Carrington.

"This is the man who has been annoying you?" he said.

"Annoying me?" she repeated in complete bewilderment.

"We were called by someone who spoke for you," explained one of the detectives. "About some lunatic who has been making telephone calls and trying to force himself into your room. We understood you did not want to complain personally, or to have a scandal, so we have only been watching to catch this man the next time he annoyed you."

"But no one has been annoying me," she said helplessly.

"You are Mrs. Carrington?"

"Yes."

"Mrs. *Beryl* Carrington?"

"Yes."

"Somebody must have been playing a joke on you," said the Saint.

"This gentleman is a friend of mine," she said shakily. "Please let him go."

The two plain-clothes men

looked at Venino with a sort of forlorn desperation, and one of them said: *"Usted no sabe nada de esto, señor?"*

With his eyes flickering back to the briefcase which Simon still held, Venino said brusquely: *"Nada.* As the *señora* says, it is either a mistake or a stupid trick."

The two detectives looked at each other. In unison, they raised their eyebrows, they pursed their lips, they shrugged. Their vise-like grips unhooked themselves from the Saint's arms. They stepped back, and bowed with a sort of defeated sarcasm.

"Pardon us, Mrs. Carrington," they said, and turned stiffly on their heels.

Beryl Carrington shook her head dazedly. "I don't understand—any of this—"

"It is a Secret Police trick, if nothing worse," Venino snapped.

"I think it was your trick, Ramón," Simon said pleasantly. "You called the cops in her name and told them that cock-and-bull story to get them to keep a watch on her. Then you pointed the sleuths out to prove that they were watching you. It's just dawned on me that that may have been the clincher that sold her on going to Europe. Did you just decide that this afternoon, Beryl?"

"Yes," she said, with unnatural steadiness. "It was exactly like that."

"And maybe that was the only proof you ever had that anyone was after him."

"It was. But—"

"He is trying to confuse you," Venino said harshly. "We must get back that briefcase."

"This?" Simon held up the alligator bag by the handle, so that the telephone directory slid out into his other hand through the seam he had opened along its under side. "Or the priceless contents?"

He showed Mrs. Carrington the book, making sure that she recognized what it was.

"This," he said reverently, "is the God-damnedest Underground you ever saw the secret list of. Every single soul in Greater Havana who can afford a telephone is a member."

Venino snatched the directory from him. "You fool," he snarled. "If anyone had discovered the marks in invisible ink against each name that is one of us—"

Mrs. Carrington was almost shaken out of her wavering, and even the Saint's eyes blinked with reluctant admiration. But he shook his head slowly.

"It's a nice try, Ramón," he conceded. "But it won't score. Can you think back coldly and impartially just for a few seconds, Beryl—even though it'll hurt? Do you really believe that any Underground movement that

had any hope of getting as far out of the ground as its own tombstone would have a list of members that was as easy as that for anyone to get hold of?

"Or that anyone who was bright enough to live long enough to become a top man in that sort of conspiracy would tell you all about it after a few rumbas, and place the life of every last member in your hands because of the sympathy he saw in your pretty eyes? I knew he was taking you for a ride the minute you told it to me that way. But I didn't appreciate quite what a ride it was until I checked on this business about the Dictatorship. And that really knocks the underpinnings from under the whole gehoozis. Because there just ain't no such animal."

"He is not a fool, *querida,*" Venino hissed. "He is insane."

"Oh, I suppose it isn't altogether our kind of democracy, Beryl," Simon said imperturbably. "But there aren't any downtrodden masses aching to shake off their chains. There may be a revolution some day, but it'll just be one political faction against another, not an uprising of the people. If Ramón hadn't scared the wits out of you, you could have asked some of 'em for yourself. You still can."

"Are you trying to destroy us all?" Venino asked passionately.

Simon glanced over his shoulder. As he had rather anticipated, the two men in dark suits had withdrawn, but not completely out of the picture. They had retreated to a polite distance out of earshot, but not out of sight.

"We still have a couple of cops handy, Beryl," he said. "Would you like me to walk over to them and say 'Nuts to the President!' so you can see if they shoot me?"

"I'm trying," Mrs. Carrington said, "not to have hysterics."

"I'm sorry," said the Saint contritely. "I'd better leave, before you get mad and call off our deal on the car."

Mrs. Carrington's mouth opened, but no sound came from it. Sound came, however, from Ramón Venino.

"What deal on the car?" he demanded in a cracked voice.

"I made Mrs. Carrington an offer to buy it," Simon said calmly. "She wants to get something more sporty, like a convertible, and I'm paying a much better price than she could get on a trade-in. I'm taking this one over from her in Miami. I guess she hadn't had time to tell you."

"But we are taking this car to Europe," Venino said shakily.

"That's silly," the Saint scoffed. "If she wants a flashy sports job, Europe's the place to get one."

"I will not allow it," Venino said.

Mrs. Carrington looked at him wonderingly. "Why not?" she

asked, and never quite knew why she said it like that.

"It would break my heart. Yes, I'm sentimental. Because of this car, we met. In this car, I showed you my home town. In this car, my heart found a new life. Call me a temperamental Latin if you like, but I do not want to see Europe with you in any other car!"

Simon lighted a cigarette, and an immeasurable artistic contentment was ripening within him.

"What he means," he said, "is that any other car would not be worth anything like as much to him. Which isn't surprising, because this would probably be the most valuable car in Europe, if not in the whole world. As I have it figured, it should sell for around three hundred thousand dollars any place where there's a fairly open market for gold, which of course rules out the United States. A really fabulous build-up has gone into jockeying you into making that trip with a date to meet Ramón on the other side."

They were both listening to him now, without interruption and in a weird kind of stillness. And the Saint put one foot up on the rear bumper and leaned a forearm lazily on his knee.

"Big-time thieves aren't an exclusively *yanqui* product. They crop up all over. Down here, I guess Ramón will rank *número uno*. Anyway, he and his mob knocked off an armored car-load of three hundred grand's worth of gold bars a few weeks before we got here. But they couldn't sell it here, and the problem was to get a heavy load like that out of the country with the cops looking everywhere for it. Ramón's brilliant idea was to watch for a likely female tourist, alone, bringing her own car over.

"With a simple little accident and a lot of charm, he was able to get away with the car for long enough for his mob to take impressions of suitable parts of it. They cast the gold in the molds and plated it while he was keeping you on the hook with his personality and his fairy tales, and last night when he had the car again they put on the new gold trimmings."

The knife that had been Pancho's flashed suddenly as Simon thumbed the catch that released the blade. "For instance, I'll bet that if we carved a notch in this bumper—"

Ramón Venino moved then, his hand going to his hip pocket and coming out with something that he kept mostly hidden under the drape of his coat.

"That is enough," he said. "You will both come with me, now, in this car."

Mrs. Carrington gasped as she saw the gun, but the Saint only glanced at it and then over Venino's shoulder.

"You made one mistake when

you had your fat friend try to warn me off at the Bambú," he said. "You made another when you sent him back with a pal this afternoon to defenestrate me —meaning heave me out of a window. Because I clobbered both of them and sent for the police, but I left before the police got there. So now the police have followed me here, and teamed up with the two that we had already. You'd be making the classic mistake of all time if you shot me now, while they're all standing behind you."

"You must think me a fool if I would believe that," Venino sneered.

"I assure you, *compadre,* he tells the truth," one of the policemen said.

V

"Why did he have to pick on me?" Beryl Carrington said.

"You mean, why couldn't he have put gold bumpers on his own car and shipped it to Europe?" said the Saint. "We don't know yet, but I'll bet anything you like on a guilty conscience. Ramón and his mob could never be sure when they might be suspected, so they wanted to plant the loot on someone who would never be suspected."

"But why me?" she said.

"I guess they just watched the boats from Key West, and you were the first good prospect they saw."

"It didn't have to be me," she said in a queer stony voice.

"Did you hear what the gendarmes said about that twenty thousand dollars reward? I think we should split it down the middle."

"I couldn't care less."

"You can do a lot of good things with ten thousand bucks."

"Don't you see?" she said. "I wish it had never happened. Or if it had to happen, I wish I'd never seen you. I wish I'd never known."

Simon Templar looked at her shrewdly and with unwonted compassion for a while, and then he stood up.

"This isn't the end of romance," he said. "But if you'd gone on with Venino, one day you'd have had to find out, and that might have been the end. Now you think the most wonderful toy you ever had has been broken, and it was all you had. But it isn't all you'll ever have. Don't start to believe that."

"Please go now," she said. But as he opened the door she raised her eyes and said: "But call me tomorrow."

Simon went out and let the doorman earn a quarter for lifting one finger at a taxi.

"You have plans for tonight, sir?" said the driver, as the cab got under way. "You should meet a nice Cuban girl. It happens I have a niece, very young, very beautiful. . . ."

reprieve at eleven

by . . . Frederick Nebel

A man may strike a bargain with life which will compel him to protect a murderer. But he'll never know peace, rich and warm.

THE AIRWAYS beacon was eight miles away, on the Ridge, and because the night was star-spangled and cloudless, Walter Ridland could see it clearly from his casement window in the tower apartment of the Shane Hotel.

He heard Ed Shane come into the room, grunting, and crackling a newspaper; and then, after a moment, the sound of Shane's raucous, bitter voice: "Barrow's sticking his chin out on this. He hangs Bonofrio—and he hangs himself."

Ridland kept his eyes on the beacon. Preoccupied, he said, "Except Bonofrio hangs by the neck."

Shane threw the newspaper on the floor and crushed out a cigarette. "He ain't hung yet," he muttered, grimacing belligerently. He was a hard-faced, fleshy man in dinner clothes. His face and hands, like the hair above his ears, were rusty, and his eyes were steely blue and mutinous. He owned the hotel, the Shane Theater and the Shane Bus and

Some twenty years ago, under the inspired guidance of the late Captain Shaw, BLACK MASK MAGAZINE *was making literary history by publishing the work of a dozen brand-new writers with a brand-new touch—a Hemingwaylike hard-boiledness transferred to the crime story medium with exceptional vigor and skill. Frederick Nebel was one of that early group of writers, and like the others his renown has steadily grown.*

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Transport Company. What was more to the point, he ran the city and county political machine.

"You'll never buy Barrow," Ridland said. "You ought to know that."

Shane came over and stood beside him. "There's other ways. He comes from your neighborhood, up there on the Ridge."

"You don't have to remind me. I used to cut his lawn."

"Yeah, you used to cut his lawn. And just twelve years ago you saved him from drowning in the Sound. He told the reporters he owed you his life, and hoped to be able to pay back the debt some day."

"You've a good memory, Ed."

"That didn't come out of my memory. Ted Norcross, who used to be probate judge up there, told me about it this afternoon." He eyed the side of Ridland's face, lit another cigarette and said, "Seems like you're the guy with the bad memory, kid." He paused, then prompted: "Well?"

Ridland shrugged. "I never thought of it in exactly that way."

"Then it might be a good idea to change your way of thinking. That Bonofrio bunch swings all the South Side and they've been on my neck for weeks. If I let 'em down, if Bennie Bonofrio hangs, McGirty's chances of being mayor again next year will be scantier than a night club babe's swim outfit. And if McGirty don't get in, I'll sure as hell lose that bus franchise."

"I'll think it over."

"Well, it's Wednesday and Bonofrio takes his last walk Friday. Besides, what's there to think over? You work for me, which means you work *all the way*. Okay, I don't want Bennie to hang. I want a commutation. Twenty years, maybe, with time off for good behavior."

Ridland frowned. "Ed, I'll say it again. You can't buy Barrow."

"I know. I tried. Look, I ain't trying to buy him now. I'm asking you to go up and see him. You know, for old times' sake—"

Irene Shane said from the doorway, "What's the matter, Pop? Can't you ever come in here without making me want to bop you?"

"What'd I do now?"

"What do *you* think?" she said, nodding first to the scattered newspapers, then to the cigarette ash on the carpet. She turned to Ridland. "I thought we were going dancing tonight."

"I've got to run up and see my father," Ridland said, hoping the excuse would sound plausible. "He's been ill again—"

"You picked a swell time to let me know."

"I just got the phone call. You

were busy dressing when I came in. I'm sorry Irene."

"Well—that leaves me holding the bag. Seems lately you've been going around in a trance, anyway. Snap out of it, just for variety's sake, won't you?"

Ridland was looking at his watch. "I'd better get started. I'll be back around ten, Irene, and we'll go downstairs for a bite. I'll try to get back earlier if I can."

"Oh, really, I wouldn't want you to put yourself out. I'm only engaged to you, you know."

He couldn't look right at her, because he was thinking of Madeline. He'd been thinking of Madeline all day. He said again, "I'll be back at ten," and went to the entryway.

Irene followed him to the foyer, and leaned back against the door, a slender, voluptuous figure in a scant backless gown of deep peach. Her hair was jet-black, pulled tight and lumped in a knot behind her ears. "Ten, then," she said.

"Yes, that's a promise."

He leaned forward to kiss her.

"Some other time," she said, raising her hands in impatient protest, palms out.

He had turned to the door, and was clasping the knob when she caught at his arm. "Listen," she said, her dark eyes accusing, "what's the matter with you?"

"Nothing, Irene."

"Don't give me that. You don't have to act like a gentleman with me."

The harsh vulgarity of the remark made him feel at once angry and embarrassed.

She was saying, "And remember, we're going to buy that house we looked at Wednesday, the big one, right smack in the middle of all those contemptible snobs—"

He said quietly, almost apologetically, "Irene." And then quickly, "See you later." He gave her arm a little squeeze and went out, pulling the door firmly shut after him.

He drove out of the city the back way, past the shoe factory and the textile mills, and hit the pike on the other side of the river. Swiftly, country darkness closed down over the road. There were fields and woods on either side, the smell of spring grass wet with dew, and intermittently there came to his ears the trilling double beat of tree toads.

He had moved from the Ridge to the city five years before, when he was twenty-three, and though the distance was only eight miles he sometimes felt that he had traveled half around the globe. He had wanted to get ahead in the world fast. The youngest of four brothers, he had felt an unquenchable desire to overtake them.

To Ed Shane he had brought a good mind, some legal knowl-

edge, and a touch of elegance. He wrote Shane's speeches, his letters, and showed him how to dress. He had not figured on Irene growing up so fast. When life was too easy a man drifted—sometimes even into love. On the books, he was vice-president of Shane Enterprises.

The Ridge was high, eight hundred feet from base to summit, and the old house, white among the elms, had stood there for so long you got the feeling it had settled solidly and immovably into the earth. The fanlight above the door was an amber glow as Emily, the housekeeper, let him into the large center hall. Upstairs, his father lay in a high four-poster bed. Madeline Halcott sat beside him.

"Hello, Walter," she said.

"Madeline," he whispered in eager gratefulness, clasping her hand. He reached out and put his other hand on his father's, and said, "Hello, Dad."

"How did you know?" his father asked.

"Madeline phoned me."

He hadn't seen his father in five months, and now he felt a little ashamed. He was shocked by the change in him, and by the way his lips trembled when he talked. The old man seemed on the verge of tears.

"It's good to see you, son."

"How did it happen?" Ridland asked.

"I was working in the garden, and I—I just fainted." The old man's voice seemed higher-pitched than usual. "But it wasn't much of a stroke. Was it, Madeline?"

She turned to Ridland. "Doctor Marberry told me it was slight."

His father said, "It left my right leg a little numb. But I'm sure that it will pass."

"I'll be downstairs, Walter," Madeline said, and left the room.

"Have I been hard with you, son?"

Ridland turned and looked down at his father. "No." He shook his head and said again, "No."

"You're not happy, are you?"

"Oh, I'm all right."

"When a man's on his feet and strong, he's apt to be hard. I was, I know. I may go any day now, and I'd like to see you happy. You won't ever be, son, until you're true to yourself; to your ideals, your conscience. You won't ever be genuinely true to any man or woman unless first you're true to yourself. That's not sentimentality. It's the strictest kind of materialism."

"I've always wanted to be independent, dad, to make my own way."

"Life usually has something to say about that, Walt."

Ridland gazed at his father for an instant with a strange, far-

away expression. Softly he said: "I want to see Madeline before she leaves. I'll be up again."

He went downstairs and in the lower hall met his eldest brother Paul, who was editor of the *Press-Dispatch,* the city's evening newspaper.

"You really came up, eh?" Paul said. "I might have known you'd wait until Madeline phoned."

Tight-lipped, Walter started to pass his brother but the latter stopped him.

"There's a rumor that you're going to make a trip to the governor—about Bonofrio," Paul said. "If you do, you'll never come in this house again."

Walter shook himself free of his brother's hand and strode into the living room so swiftly, so violently, that Madeline started. His high cheekbones were splashed with sudden color. He said quietly out of his confusion: "Thanks for phoning me, Madeline."

"I knew your father wanted to see you," she replied. "And I knew you'd come."

He sat down beside her and looked at her, admiring anew her strikingly beautiful features, after five, almost six years; and the way her rich brown hair lay in a soft wave across her left temple. She smiled openly, goodhumoredly, at his frank scrutiny, her lips parting just as they had done the first time he had kissed her. Centuries ago, it seemed.

He had thought nothing of it then. He had been a self-centered young fool, and he had kissed a lot of girls. He remembered how she had found him kissing one, and the hurt and shock in her eyes and how she had turned from him with a strangled sob.

But he had gone on his way, carefree, and it had meant nothing to him.

"You've been away," he said, dropping his eyes to her hands. They were unusually attractive hands, slender-fingered, with pinkish nails and flesh-colored moons. She wore no rings.

"A year and a half," she told him.

"Where?"

"France and England. And Switzerland. And a couple of weeks in Austria. But mostly France."

"Where would you like most to live?" he asked.

"Here, on the Ridge."

"How are your mother and father? I haven't seen—"

"Oh, fine, splendid. Dad's a little bald, that's all. He's been repairing the summer house this week."

He remembered the summer house, and the smell of lilacs and Madeline in his arms, that first time, slender, and yielding and full of wonder when he kissed her. He rose quickly.

"I told dad I'd be right back."

"And I've got to be going. I'll stop by tomorrow, to see how he is."

"I'll drive you home," he said. "Wait."

"Oh, I'll walk, Walter. It's not far."

He put his hand against her waist. "Please wait."

In the center hall he found Paul again and the older man looked at him steadily, out of narrowed brown eyes. "Remember, Walt, if you play on Tom Barrow's sympathy, if you save that rat Bonofrio's life—"

"Mind your own business," Walter said, his jaw muscles tightening.

"His record—look at his record!" Paul's voice rose angrily. "Fifteen arrests in the past six years. Six indictments. He's stolen, he's blackmailed, he's committed every kind of crime from larceny to murder and he's committed murder half a dozen times. Save his dirty life and I'll blast you in the paper, even though you're my brother!"

"You always did like to threaten people, Paul."

"I dislike threatening people. Get that straight. But you owe some loyalty to your family—and yourself."

"Don't try to shame me with that, Paul. You can't make me do what I don't want to do." His voice was low, thick. "You've never let me alone—you and Eric and Pete. You were always free with advice. I was always the kid. You a great editor and Eric a great surgeon and Pete a great engineer—"

"And you could have been a great lawyer. But you hadn't the guts to go it the hard way."

Walter said desperately, "You'll not tell me what to do!"

When he drove Madeline home, out Arnold Street between the long rows of dogwood trees, he felt deflated, weary, and unable to think. And when he pulled up in front of her house he shut off the ignition and leaned back with a barely audible sigh. She put her hand on the door to open it, but changed her mind and said instead: "Have you a cigarette?"

He gave her one, and they lit up from the same match. He smoked a while, and stared straight ahead through the windshield.

His voice, preoccupied, came out at last: "I hope I'll be seeing you again, Madeline . . ." He didn't know how to go on.

"Have I changed?" she asked quickly, and he knew that the inflection was deliberate, to fill a gap.

"No." He paused. "Have I?"

She nodded. "Yes, a great deal."

"Can't you be more specific?"

"Well, you're older now. You seem quieter somehow, more thoughtful."

He looked at her. "What I really mean is—" he breathed with effort, "what do you think of me?"

"Oh, I haven't thought of how I think of you, Walter."

He turned and stared into the darkness. "But you've heard things. People talk. You must have heard Paul."

She was silent for a minute and then she gave a little laugh and said, "I like you, Walter—a great deal."

He took hold of her hand and pressed it. "Come in town and lunch with me some day. *Soon.*"

"I'll be going in Friday afternoon."

"How about the lobby of the Southgate?"

She nodded, pressing his hand. "All right, Walter. I'll meet you at five."

He felt a strange confused desire to take her in his arms, as though that single act of boldness would magically sweep him back five years to the summer house. But would it sweep her back too? He couldn't tell, and he didn't want to break the one tie of friendship and understanding that remained to him on the Ridge. But exulting in her nearness his heart swelled with a nameless splendor that was close to ecstasy.

When he entered the tower apartment at half past ten, Shane's wife, Thelma, was having a highball with Vince Bonofrio. She was Ed Shane's third wife, a tall copper-haired woman of thirty-six with a fine pair of white shoulders and a wide red slash of a mouth.

"Ed's downstairs guzzling," she said.

Ridland stared past her, his eyes searching the room. "Where is Irene?" he asked.

"She's downstairs, too, in the Peacock Room, hoofing with Riley Burns. Ed's probably got his chin hung on the bar by this time."

"Ed's a great guy," Vince Bonofrio said. He was a burly man, swart and handsome, with a powerful neck and big muscular hands. He owned a string of filling stations and held the controlling interest in the Triple D Towing and Lighterage Company. He raised his chin toward Thelma and said, "Go powder your nose, Toots."

Ridland drifted to the front of the room, to the casement windows, and saw again the airways beacon on the Ridge. Bonofrio was at his elbow blowing fragrant Egyptian cigarette smoke against the windowpanes.

"Ed said you're going to fix things for Bennie."

Ridland shrugged. "How can I tell?"

"Barrow never forgets a good turn or a bad one. Fix it right, pal, and it's worth ten thousand. Just get him a life sentence.

That's all we want. We'll get him out in five years. If he knocks anybody else off, I'll break his neck."

Ridland turned from the window. "I've got to go down and join Irene."

"Yeah. We're going down too."

"Better rub the lipstick off," Ridland said.

Bonofrio chuckled. "Thelma does the damnedest things."

Irene was dancing with Riley Burns when Ridland looked in the Peacock Room, so he went round to the bar and found Ed Shane standing with both feet on the brass rail.

"Hello, Duke," Shane said, swaying unsteadily as he turned. "How's your old man?"

"Not too good. He had a slight stroke."

"Tough. I'd like to meet your old man sometime, Duke. But I guess I never will. We got the dough and they got the—well, something. What is it they got, Duke? Anything I touch turns to dough and yet you can't turn the dough into what they got, what you got. What is it you got, Duke? Here I buy the best underwear and I spend fortunes on dames, and look what I pay for my suits—a couple of hundred bucks and up. And look at my apartment—twelve rooms and five baths. And the four cars I got. Duke, you know what: you annoy me. Have a drink."

It was at times like this that Ed Shane got under Ridland's skin and made him remember that Shane was ruthless, faithless even, and that he had come by his wealth through sharp dealing and criminal coercion.

"Duke, you got to see Barrow. You got to fix it so Bennie don't swing."

"The music's stopped. I'd better see Irene."

"Yeah, you better. She's with that guy with the air-cooled teeth."

Riley Burns' prominent teeth grinned at Ridland across a large round table. "I've been warming angel-child up for you," he said, and winked.

Irene said to Ridland, "I just love you because you're late all the time, like a prima donna. Ain't he handsome, Riley?"

"She's high." Riley Burns grinned. "Look out when she begins to loop."

Presently Vince Bonofrio and Thelma Shane joined them and when the music started Ridland got up and danced with Irene. He didn't feel like dancing, and his thoughts kept returning to the Ridge.

"Get a little hep," Irene said. "This is no waltz."

"You're bouncing."

"Oh, now you're telling me I don't know how to dance."

"No, I'm not. You're just a little tight and you keep bouncing."

"I can dance with a million guys," she said, and left him standing on the floor.

Later, when they were all at the table, the headwaiter approached Thelma and said, "Mrs. Shane, excuse me, but Mr. Shane wants to tend bar again."

"I'll go," Ridland said.

He took Ed Shane up to the tower apartment, holding him up all the way, and eased him down on a divan in the living room. He unbuttoned Shane's waistcoat and took off his collar and his shoes. Deep in Ridland's throat was a nauseous feeling, as though he had eaten something which didn't agree with him.

When the others came in, Riley Burns with them and another couple Ridland didn't know, Thelma stared down at Shane and said, "A fine bum I married."

"Lay off him," Vince Bonofrio said dryly.

They looked at each other hard and long, but it was Thelma's eyes that dropped. Bonofrio was, Ridland knew, a shrewd man—shrewd enough to be careful about letting anybody know that he and Thelma Shane were playing around.

"We're all driving out to Bib's for steak sandwiches," Riley Burns said.

"I'm not," Irene said, and left the living room.

The others went out. In a little while Irene came back into the room. She didn't look at Ridland. Her eyes were narrowed, her lips pursed, and the color on her face and throat was high. She sauntered back and forth in front of him, her hips rolling, her dress corkscrewing lazily about her legs. Suddenly she stopped and glared at him.

"Well, say something!" she snapped.

He just looked at her, his eyes vacant, his thoughts far away. She stepped up and hit him across the face with the back of her hand. Her rings hurt him. He winced and when she struck him again he caught hold of her wrists and his lips drew tight against his teeth.

But he didn't say anything. She was drawn up, tense, her eyes vivid and hard, and her plump lower lip thrust forward. He let her wrists go and stood up and went out into the foyer to get his hat and coat.

She was in front of him at the door. She said in a low, passionate voice, "You can't get out of this! You're going to marry me. My old man put you where you are and you're going to marry me."

He nodded, and said, "But right now, I'm going home."

Next day he kept to himself. He had an office, a large one, very modern but his time was his own. He went to a movie and then to several bars where he wasn't known. He resisted, time

and time again, a strong desire to get in his car and drive up to the Ridge.

He made a phone call, however, and asked how his father was. No matter how hard he tried to think down a straight course, he always became mixed up. Once, he thought of taking a plane and going away, far away, where no one would ever see him again. But he knew he couldn't do that.

He went back to his apartment building at five. The phone rang but he didn't answer it. He went out at nine and ate in a chop house and then he went to a bar and began drinking rye highballs.

At ten o'clock Ed Shane came in and said: "Duke, are you giving me the runaround?"

"Have a drink."

Shane's eyes were hard as buttons. "Nuts to you and your drink! I asked you a question. Listen, baby, when a guy works for me he works up to the hilt, and when I ask something, I mean I want it done. Nobody begged you to come work for me."

"No, Ed, you didn't beg me."

"Okay, then. They swing Bennie at eleven sharp tomorrow night. You know what I expect you to do. Dodge it, and you're out of everything. You're out of fifty grand a year, and the fifty I was going to give you and Irene. And you won't be marrying Irene. You'll be back where you started from. Any guy that double-crosses me hangs himself. Good night."

Knocking around town, alone, from bar to bar, Ridland didn't get home until three and his brain was so befogged that he went right to sleep. Quick forgetfulness was what he had wished for, why he had drunk so much.

He got up at noon. The papers were full of news of Bennie Bonofrio and of the last-minute activity of his lawyers. Twice during the afternoon Ridland started downstairs, to get his car and drive the hundred miles to the state capital, yet each time he held back. He wanted to see Madeline, and at five he met her in the lobby of the Southgate.

She was smartly dressed in a gray-speckled suit, a white silk blouse with a gay little string tie, and a kind of jockey cap of black velvet. She gave him a forthright smile but in her eyes there was a watchful look which he did not miss and in the clasp of her hand he felt a peculiarly unsteady pressure.

In a corner of the cocktail lounge a man was mooning over a piano, playing popular songs and old favorites quietly and affectionately.

Ridland said, "You look wonderful, Madeline. Where'd you get the suit and the pretty hat?"

"Do you like them?"

He had always liked the way she dressed and the way she carried herself and the way she met strangers, easily and good-humoredly.

Back of her, on the wall, was a clock, its gilt hands moving against a frosted glass face. As they talked, his eyes kept wandering to the clock and twice he checked it with his watch.

She said, "If you've an engagement Walter—"

"Are you going back to the Ridge?" he asked.

"Yes. I came in on a bus and I can get one outside."

"I'll drive you up. I'm going that way. I have to go to the state—"

Her eyes flickered and the next instant she was grinding out a cigarette, grinding it to pulp in the littered tray.

"We'd better go, then," she said. "It's six, and anyhow, dinner's at seven."

Driving up the pike, a strange silence rode with them. It was a pointed silence and the point pressed somewhere, sharply and unremittingly, against Ridland's chest. Why go at all? Why not drop Madeline off at the Ridge and then, somewhere beyond, give a jerk at the wheel and pile through somebody's split-rail fence. An easy way.

He looked sidewise at Madeline and saw her quiet, expressionless face, her downcast eyes. In her lap, her hands were restive, but that was all.

"It's a nice evening," he said.

"Yes, it's nice."

That was all they said on the way up and when he stopped in front of her house she opened the car's door instantly and said, "Well, it was sweet of you, Walter—the cocktails and driving me home." She held out her hand, smiling a twisted smile. "I wish you a lot of luck, all the things you want, everything—"

Her lip quivered and suddenly her hand tightened on his and her eyes filled. She cried, "Why must you do it? Why must you go against everything, against your people? Oh, Walter, you don't know what you're doing!"

He felt his scalp prickle, grow taut. "You're with them now, too," he said.

"I'm with nobody but you—nobody. I love you, I can't help it. I know you're engaged, but what does that mean to me, if I love?"

"Did Paul speak to you today?"

"Paul is heartbroken. Yes, he did. But, believe me, I'm not with them, with anybody but you."

He glared at the clock on the dashboard. "I've got to go."

She stepped out of the car and said, "Don't ever think I'll hate you, no matter what you do," and turned and ran through the gate.

He drove on, his eyes glued to the road ahead, and once he came to a turn, a sharp one, and thought, "Here would be a good place." But while he thought of it he was round the curve and on the straightaway again, his headlights streaming up the road. He boomed through small villages, mellow in the spring evening, and past the lights of minor cities, in narrow streets noisy with radio loudspeakers and auto horns.

It was ten when he drove up to the governor's mansion.

Barrow received him in his study, a tall, gaunt man, shaggy-haired, standing with his back to a Georgian mantel. "Hello, Walter. How is everything at the Ridge?"

"Father had a slight stroke but Dr. Marberry said he'll recover."

"Good man, Marberry." Barrow's lids were crinkling over his eyes and there was a ghost of a grimace playing around his lips. He knew, Ridland told himself, what was in the wind.

"I've only ale in the house, Walt. Would you like some?"

"Yes, I would."

"Are they having any more trouble with the elms on Grosvenor Street?"

They sat in big chairs and drank ale from tall straight glasses and Ridland told him about the elms and about George Halcott repairing the old summer house. And watched the hands on the banjo clock turning, turning.

Barrow gave the impression of being calm, peaceful, his long body lying in the great armchair, his shaggy brows shadowing his eyes. Yet Ridland knew what was in the governor's mind and he knew that he had only to ask for Bennie Bonofrio's life and it would be spared.

But he kept on talking about the Ridge, working back from the present to the days when he cut Barrow's lawn and gathered his apples. And always his eyes kept lifting to the banjo clock; while across the hills and valleys, he knew, other men, and one man especially, were conscious of the time also. Sitting straight in a chair meant for reclining, the muscles in his arms and body were taut, the insides of his closed hands were hot with sweat.

At ten to eleven the butler came in and said to Barrow, "Warden Osgood is on the telephone, sir."

"I'll take it here," Barrow said. He rose and went slowly across the room to his desk.

Ridland also rose and stood with his back to the mantel, his eyes shimmering and his hands clasped in a bony knot behind his back.

Barrow was saying, "Yes, hello. Warden." And then he was listening, and in a little while he said, "Just a minute,"

and lowered the instrument. He spoke quietly across the room to Ridland, "They are about to hang Bonofrio." He waited, his gaunt face expressionless.

There came into Walter Ridland's heart suddenly, all at once, a feeling of great emotion, and in his head there was a sound like music, bells and trumpets. He felt marvelously alone, on his own feet, with no one near him, no one urging him to a hateful course of action.

And he knew, for the first time in his life, what it was that was singing inside him. He knew it wasn't weakness. He knew that no one was driving him to this decision which now stood bold and inviolable in his heart and brain. It was his own and it was born of the things he loved and cherished.

He said to Barrow, "I've nothing to offer, or ask, in behalf of Bonofrio. Neither his life nor his death. He means nothing to me."

He closed his eyes, but not in shame. Peace, rich and warm, was flowing through him now, like a deep river. He heard Barrow saying on the telephone, "Nothing, Warden. You will carry out your duty . . ." And the deep river kept flowing, undisturbed. For Ridland realized that at last, and for the first time, he had been true to himself.

It hadn't been easy.

Barrow hung up and came over and put his hand on Ridland's shoulder. "I'd have done it for you, you know."

"I know."

"You can tell Shane that you asked me and I refused."

"No. I want him to know what I did, because then he'll throw me out. That's what I want. And now, if you don't mind," he added, "I'd like to phone Madeline."

DON'T MISS THESE UNUSUAL STORIES FEATURED IN OUR NEXT ISSUE—DRAMATIC HEADLINERS ALL

THE INGENUOUS COLONEL by LESLIE CHARTERIS

THE KIDNAPPING OF JOHNNY WAVERLY by AGATHA CHRISTIE

JIM HANVEY INTERVENES by OCTAVUS ROY COHEN

THE MURDER TRAP by WILLIAM MACHARG

KNOWS ALL: TELLS ALL by HORATIO WINSLOW

NO MOTIVE FOR MURDER by CRAIG RICE

i never forget a face

by . . . Cyril Hare

If your memory is split right down the middle—it's a deadly mistake to do a favor for a man wrapped up in his own affairs.

I'LL TELL you an odd thing about me. I never forget a face. The only trouble is that nine times out of ten I'm hanged if I can fit a name to it. I know what you're going to say. You're going to smile, and acknowledge that you suffer from the same failing yourself. Lots of people do to some extent, but that's not exactly what I'm driving at. When I say I never forget a face, I really mean it.

I can pass a total stranger in the street one day and recognize him again months after, even though not a word may have passed between us. It's an almost frightening gift. My wife says sometimes that I ought to be one of those sharp-eyed gossip columnists who hang about at film premieres spotting the celebrities. But I take pains to remind her that I'd fall down pretty badly on a job like that. What good would it do me to spot a celebrity if I couldn't say which one it was.

That's my trouble—names. It is, in fact, so serious a failing

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Have you ever sat in a crowded train, and tried to reconstruct the past history of the surprisingly familiar little man just across the aisle who seems weighed down by some ghastly tragedy? You're sure you've seen him before, but you just can't place *him. If you're wise you'll let your memory for faces die a quick death. You'll understand why when you've read Cyril Hare's utterly terrifying dramatization of what* could *happen.*

---

that it has landed me in difficulties time and time again. But with a little ingenuity, one can usually manage to get by one way or another.

In my job of running around the city drumming up business on commission, I have to be very careful not to let on that I can't for the life of me remember whether the customer I'm dealing with is called Smith or Moses. I've offended people unavoidably that way, and lost a good contract more than once.

But, on the whole, I stand to gain more than I lose by this queer memory of mine. I've often gone up to a man in a bar who didn't know me from Adam, and said, "I'm sure we've met before," and incredible as it may seem, I've been able to give him a hint as to where it was. In fact, I can always connect a face with a background.

Well, as I was saying, I can go up to this man, this total stranger, and remind him of the tennis match at Wimbledon or whatever event his face gives me a mind's eye picture of and inside of five minutes we're talking business.

I can always get a line on his name later on. You'd be surprised how many valuable customers I've picked up that way just on the strength of a double brandy, and a good memory for faces.

As you may have guessed, there's not a man, woman or child here in Bardfield that I don't know by sight. I've lived in Bardfield ever since the war. What I like about the place is that it's still quite countrified despite the fact that it's only forty minutes from Waterloo.

It's a very great nuisance having the village the best part of a mile from the station on the other side of Bardfield Heath. But after all, that keeps us pleasantly secluded. There's a very friendly crowd who travel up and down to the city from there on week days. I don't need to tell you I can't recall the names of more than half of them, though we pass the time of day cheerfully enough.

My wife complains that I don't even know the names of our next-door neighbors, and she's entirely right. All the same, when we got into a traffic violation jam with the car in Dover last summer I was able to pacify a very angry police officer simply because I recognized him from Bardfield, though it turned out he'd left the place two years before. He'd served behind the counter in the grocery shop, he told me, and I don't do the shopping once in a blue moon. See what I mean?

Well, on this particular evening I'd been forced to work overtime at the office and I almost broke my neck getting to Waterloo in time to catch the

seven-seven. There was quite a crowd in the train at first, but they thinned out at the inner suburbs and by the time we got to Ellingham—two stops before mine—there were only the two of us left in the compartment, myself and a young man of about thirty-three.

He wasn't one of our regulars —they habitually keep directors' hours—but he was a Bardfield man all right. I'd known that the instant I'd set eyes on him. I'd nodded and smiled to him when I saw him get in at Waterloo, and he had responded in kind. But the nod and the smile didn't take me any further.

The annoying thing was that I simply couldn't *place* the fellow, if you know what I mean. His face said *Bardfield* to me, as plain as a golfer's tally card. But that was all it did say I couldn't hang it on to any particular thing in Bardfield—not the golf course, nor the Red Lion, nor any of my usual haunts.

I put him down as one of the newcomers who had moved in lately to the new houses by the bus-stop, though I couldn't even be sure of that. Some of us old-timers are inclined to be stand-offish with the newcomers, but that's not my way. It never has been. I always say you never know when your next big business deal is going to involve someone you've just met, and you can't afford to neglect chances.

So when the two of us found ourselves alone in the smoking car with room to stretch our legs and relax in comfort, I started to talk, just as if we were old acquaintances, which, in a way, we were. On my side, at least. But I might have known I couldn't get much out of him. He was a well-spoken young man, with a quiet, friendly manner, but he didn't open up at all.

I can generally count on finding out what a man's line of business is in ten and a half minutes—the exact time it takes to travel from Ellingham to Bardfield by train—and know whether he's a potential customer worth following up or not. But—this one beat me. He looked a bit tired and worried, I remember, as though he'd been overworking lately, and I thought maybe sheer physical weariness had made his reactions a trifle slow.

"Do you generally travel down on this train?" I asked him. That's usually a pretty safe approach, because if they take one train regularly nine times out of ten they'll tell you why, and discuss their business problems and complain a bit. It's only human nature.

But he just smiled and shook his head and said, "Not generally," which didn't help in the least.

Of course, I went on to talk about the train service in general, comparing this train with that. But still he refused to talk. He just agreed with all I said, without seeming to have any opinions of his own. I told him I sometimes went to the city in my car, but that didn't make him loquacious either.

Well, to cut a long story short, I had to give up in despair. I'd told him a great deal about myself, of course, to put him at his ease. I'd even boasted a trifle about a rather shrewd little deal I'd pulled off that morning—a perfectly legal transaction, but not exactly the kind that goes through the firm's books, if you follow me. After all, if a man can't do cash-under-the-counter business from time to time we'd all be paying surtaxes and where would we be then?

I've always found there's nothing like a little bragging to start a reserved fellow-traveler talking. For a moment I was elated, for he actually did seem interested in a quiet sort of way.

But it was no sale. He just wouldn't open up about himself. So, as I say, I gave up, and started to read my paper. And—you won't find this hard to credit—the very next time I looked at him he'd put his head back, and was sound asleep.

We were just entering the station then, and though the train pulled up with a violent jerk it failed to wake him. Well, I'm a kind-hearted individual and I wasn't going to let a fellow Bardfield man be carried on all the way to Dorbury—not if I could help it. So I tapped him sharply on the knee.

"Hey, wake up," I said. "We're there!"

He came awake all at once, and smiled at me. "Why, so we are!" he exclaimed and scrambled out after me.

I don't need to tell you what the weather was like just then. When we came out of the station it was as dark as pitch and the rain was coming down in sheets. There was a wind blowing strong enough to knock you over, and it was as chilly as an undertaker's trowel.

Well, what would you have done? Yes—that's exactly what I did do. I turned around and said to him: "Look, here, the bus isn't due for a quarter of an hour. I've got my car in the parking area, and if you're in one of the new houses it will be no trouble at all for me to run you up there."

"Thanks very much," he said, and we splashed across the puddles together to where my old car was standing, and off we drove.

"This is awfully kind of you," he said as we started, and no other word did he utter until we were half-way to what I thought was to be our destination. Then

he suddenly turned to me and said, "You can put me down here."

"What, *here?*" I asked him.

It seemed crazy, because there wasn't a house within five hundred yards of us and it was still raining and blowing like the end of the world. But all the same, I slowed down automatically, as anyone in similar circumstances would have done.

The next thing that happened was that something hit me the most tremendous whack on the back of the head. I pitched forward over the steering-wheel and then everything went black.

I can vaguely remember being tumbled out of the car, and when I came to I was lying in the ditch with the rain pouring down on me, with a splitting head, no car in sight and my pockets—as I found out later—as empty as a bank when the Exchange rate hits rock bottom.

I pulled myself up eventually and somehow managed to foot it into Bardfield. I made straight for the police station and grateful I was that it's the first building you come to as you enter town. So here I am, Sergeant, come to report the theft of a car, a new umbrella, a gold watch and a wallet containing a hundred and fifty-two pounds in notes.

Of course, the minute I got here I remembered who the scoundrel was. You've got his picture up outside now. I've seen it every day for the last week. That's why his face said Bardfield to me. "Wanted for Robbery With Violence and Attempted Murder — John —" Hang it! I've forgotten the name again. I just can't keep names in my head. But that's the man, Sergeant, you can bet your bottom dollar on it. I tell you—I never forget a *face.*

The Saint matches wits for high stakes
with a gentleman of the turf, and sets
London agog with a racetrack miracle

THE INGENUOUS COLONEL

A Simon Templar Story

by LESLIE CHARTERIS

IN THE NEXT SAINT

murder with flowers

by . . . Q. Patrick

White roses for purity—red for a love impassioned! How was Peter Duluth to know that murder could alter the language of the flowers?

IRIS AND I were dancing at the Opal Room. A rumba orchestra was doing wicked things. We were very groomed and expensive and chic that night. Very gay, too, because it was our first wedding anniversary and we were pleased about it.

Other people were dancing there, too, I suppose. I didn't notice them, except maybe to feel sorry for them for not having Iris, wonderful and dangerous in a gown that didn't cover much territory above the hips.

"Darling," she said, "we do a mean rumba, don't we?"

"Yes, darling," I said. "We do."

"Mr. and Mrs. Peter Duluth!" she said. "Twelve months later, and it still sounds—voluptuous!"

It was then that we saw the Black Beard.

He was sitting alone at a table close to the dance floor. A massive, imperial gentleman, immaculately black and white, with a white carnation in his lapel. His beard sprouted magnificently—jet-black and godlike.

When the famed Mr. and Mrs. Peter Duluth take to sleuthing on their very own wedding anniversary, in a crime setting as darkly mysterious as a murdered harlequin in a carnival-bright shroud, there's bound to be a sounding of welkins wherever mystery lovers congregate. Here indeed is a Q. Patrick in the master's liveliest vein, worthy to stand four-square with his widely acclaimed, best-selling novel, MY SON, THE MURDERER.

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There was an empty champagne bottle at his side. It didn't look as if it was the first empty champagne bottle that had been there that evening. He was gazing at it and weaving slightly in his chair.

We were only a couple of feet away when he looked up and saw us. At least, it was Iris he saw. Naturally. Somewhere, above the beard, his eyes lit up, and the beard waggled in a roguish, satyr smile. One heavy lid lowered at Iris in a ponderous wink.

Then suddenly, as he really focused on her, his face went blank, and another expression came—a kind of shocked amazement that was almost horror. "You!" he said.

He tried to get up, sank back, and then did get up. He leaned across the table toward us. Very slowly, he said, "I warned you. On page eighty-four I warned you. You must be mad dining out tonight—of all nights—when your picture is all over *The Onlooker?*"

That was an odd thing for a complete stranger to say. But I didn't rumba Iris away. Something kept us there. I think it was the Ancient Mariner quality of the black beard and the steady, unwavering stare.

He swayed slightly. The black beard bobbed in a refined little hiccup.

"The white rose!" he said, "And the red rose!" And then, emphatically: "They mean blood."

He stopped. I pushed Iris backward and then sideways. Fantastically, I was a little scared. I don't think Iris was. I think she was just curious.

She smiled suddenly and said, "Go on. The white rose and the red rose . . . What about them?"

"The white rose—and the red rose. They're out. You know they're out."

He raised one of the large hands. The gesture practically toppled him forward into the champagne bottle. Pointing a weighty, ambassadorial finger, he said, "It's life or death for you, young lady. You must realize that." He paused. "The elephant hasn't forgotten."

The music was throbbing, and all around us sleek, expensive people were dancing sleekly and expensively. He was only an old drunk with a black beard. There was nothing to be alarmed about.

And yet . . .

"Life or death," he said. "You mustn't die, young lady. You are too beautiful to die."

No one around seemed to have noticed anything. The music was seething. I started pushing Iris away from the man.

We were on the opposite side of the floor when I said, "Is that Beard a part of your past, darling?"

"I—I never even saw him

before." There was a shaken look in her eyes. "Life or death! Why should the white rose and the red rose mean blood—for me?"

"Just drunken nonsense," I said.

"He said my picture was in *The Onlooker.* It isn't in *The Onlooker,* Peter. Or is it?"

"I don't know," I said.

We neither of us read *The Onlooker.* But millions of other people do. It tells you all about everything so snappily. We pretended we had lost interest then. We went on acting like two elegant people being gay on their wedding anniversary. But it was all rather synthetic.

Suddenly Iris said, "After all, Peter, you're a famous play producer and I'm a sort of actress. Maybe I am in *The Onlooker.*"

"Maybe."

"Let's—let's buy a copy."

"Yes. Let's."

We scuttled off the dance floor. That showed just how skin-deep our indifference was.

The Opal Room is part of the ultra-swank St. Anton Hotel. We hurried through the tables with the music *tom-tomming* behind us. We were out in corridors with inch-thick carpets and enormous mirrors. We reached a sort of central lounge which housed a magazine stand.

We went to the stand. Everyone turned and stared at Iris. They always do—especially after midnight. One man stared in particular. He was thin and sharp-nosed and youngish in a gay trench coat with a light gray hat. I noticed him vaguely because he was biting his nails. Biting them savagely and looking at Iris, with something nasty about his mouth.

At the stand I said, "*The Onlooker,* please," to a depressed blonde.

She gave it to me. Iris snatched it and started leafing through the pages. I stood at her side.

Two women with exotic perfumes swished by, patting their necks. The man in the gray trench coat stood there nibbling at his nails and watching Iris sidelong behind a cigarette.

"*Farming,*" read Iris. "*Sports* . . . female discus-throwing champion . . . that's not me . . . *Theater* . . . Circus opens at Lawrence Stadium tomorrow . . . No . . . *Art* . . . Oh, look, Peter!"

I was looking, all right. It was uncanny. There under the heading *Art* was a photograph. It was a photograph of a very beautiful woman, a woman whom anyone except a husband could easily have taken for Iris. Dark, with those same amazing eyes, that devastating bone structure.

Under the photograph it said: *Eulalia Crawford.* And under that: *She does everything except stick pins in them.*

"Eulalia Crawford!" said Iris. "She's a dead ringer for you."

"Nonsense." Iris looked ominous. "She's at least ten years older."

"Not to a drunken Beard in a dim light," I said, trying to wriggle out of that. "It's obvious he mistook you for her."

We read what it said about Eulalia Crawford. It didn't help much. It told us that Eulalia Crawford was a "pulchritudinous, amazingly talented" doll-maker. She had a studio downtown. She made the smartest portrait dolls for the smartest people. In fact, after a modest beginning designing carnival figures, she had lifted the doll business into the realms of art. "I do everything with dolls," she had told the reporter laughingly, "except stick pins in them."

"Eulalia Crawford, the doll-maker!" said Iris. "Peter, I've—I've heard of her. She—she's a sort of a relative."

"A relative?"

"Yes." Iris looked excited. "A fifth cousin, or something like that."

"It explains why you look alike," I said. "But that's all it explains."

"But she's in danger—terrible danger," said Iris slowly. "I could tell he meant it, Peter. The Beard, I mean. I could tell from his face. He really knows there's danger for her. The red rose, and the white rose, he said life or death."

We stood there in that elegant lounge. From somewhere far off the rumba sidled through to us, a torrid echo of the South. I looked up. I caught the eye of the man in the gray trench coat. He glanced away.

"If there's danger for Eulalia," said Iris suddenly, "we must warn her."

"Warn her?"

"Yes." Iris looked beautiful and purposeful. "After all, she's blood of my blood and—"

"But just because a crazy, drunken Beard—"

"He wasn't a crazy Beard. He was very sane."

"Then, if you think so, go back and get the truth out of him."

She shook her head. "He'd be suspicious once he knew I wasn't Eulalia. And if I was Eulalia he'd know I wouldn't have to ask him the truth. I must telephone Eulalia."

"But what will you say?" I asked.

"Tell her about the Beard and the red rose and the white rose and page eighty-four and the elephant." Iris looked calm.

She started toward a lighted sign saying *Telephones*. I sighed and followed. As I did so, I happened to glance over my shoulder, and I noticed that the man in the gray trench coat was strolling very casually after us.

Iris reached the Manhattan phone book ahead of me. Effi-

ciently, she started turning pages, murmuring, "Crawford, Eulalia . . . Crawford, Eulalia . . . Here she is."

She disappeared into a phone booth. The man in the trench coat loitered aimlessly. Soon Iris came out again, and said: "Cousin Eulalia—I liked that 'Cousin!' —wasn't there, Peter. But she's expected any minute. A man answered, a man with a stammer."

"A stammer?"

"Yes. A stammer. He said it would be fine for us to go down right away."

I stared. "You mean we're going to Eulalia *now?*"

"We certainly are." She looked dreamy and thrilled to the bone. "We've wined and dined and danced, Peter. Now we plunge into a romantic adventure, and that, darling, is exactly my idea of how to celebrate our first anniversary."

I had a strong feeling that I didn't agree.

The man with the gray trench coat seemed to have lost interest. I saw him ahead of us, moving away down the lounge toward the main door of the hotel.

I went back to the Opal Room and paid my check. I peered through the dancers, looking for the wretched Beard who had started the trouble. I couldn't see him.

When I got back to Iris, she had unchecked her silver fox cape and had it over her shoulders. She looked exactly the way a girl in a silver fox cape should look—slender and beautiful and distinguished. We started toward the swinging doors leading to the street.

Iris said, "You noticed that man in the gray trench coat, Peter? I—I didn't like him." Her expression was rather odd. "The way he looked at me. Almost as if he knew me and . . ."

"And what?"

But she didn't say any more about it, because at that moment we got tangled up with a large, liveried doorman who started calling us a taxi. We got into it and I gave Eulalia Crawford's address.

II

It was raining—a slight drizzle spattering the windows of the taxi. Iris seemed remote, her thoughts like a thin layer of cellophane between us. Once she turned to look out of the rear window. She didn't say anything. Then, later, as we swung off Fifth Avenue somewhere in the 'teen streets, she turned around again.

Softly she said, "I may be crazy, Peter. But I think we're being followed. Look."

I scrambled around and stared out through the rear window. I could see the bright headlights of a private automobile. It was just swinging off Fifth Avenue behind us.

"It's been there ever since we left the St. Anton," said Iris.

I protested strenuously. "Do we have to go through with this screwball idea?"

"It's such a heavenly screwball idea," said Iris. "And if someone *is* following us . . ."

"What?"

"Then it probably means the whole thing is serious. All the more reason to warn Eulalia."

The taxi was crawling now in a dimly lit, deserted side street. The driver was peering out of his window at the house numbers. The other car was still behind us.

"Two-thirty-five," said the driver. "Here we are."

He had stopped in front of a house. There were lighted windows in it, and the door, white-painted, showed a brightly illuminated hallway. I paid the fare and we stepped out. The taxi drove off.

And then it all happened, like something in one of those artifically speeded-up movies.

The car which had been dawdling behind us suddenly accelerated and came roaring forward. We swung around. We stood there by the curb, hypnotized for a moment, watching the car zoom through the dead, dark street toward us.

And as we watched it, something hurtled out of it—something large and red, soaring through the air and splashing on the damp sidewalk at our feet. We both stared down at it. I felt a kind of amazement, teetering over into horror. Because the thing was a bouquet of roses—deep scarlet roses.

I was still staring stupidly at the roses when Iris gave a little cry, grabbed at my arm, and said, "Duck, Peter!"

I followed her lead, half collapsing to the sidewalk, and only just in time.

A split second later the sharp report of a gun snarled, once and then again. I heard bullets, whistling close to my ear.

"The door!" shouted Iris. "Get to the door!"

Quicker than seemed humanly possible, we both half ran, half scrambled to the outer, glass-paneled door of two-thirty-five. I tugged the door open and pushed Iris in. I dashed in behind her, slamming the door.

The second inner door was locked. We were trapped there in the little hallway. Outside in the street I could hear the car engine roaring at a standstill, What was to prevent the gunman getting out of the car and coming here?

I looked around wildly at the buzzers. I saw Eulalia Crawford's name coupled with another woman's name. I made a stab at the buzzer. I hit the wrong one.

I stared dazedly. The car engine was still roaring outside.

Then an answering buzz sounded in the inner door. Like a flash Iris pushed the door inward. I didn't know what was going on in the street any more. I think I heard the car drive away. But I didn't care. I slammed the door behind us.

"Eulalia's studio," panted Iris. "The man on the phone said it was on the top floor."

We started tumbling up the stairs. What sort of a wedding anniversary was this turning out to be?

Iris said breathlessly, "Did you see the man who shot at us?"

I hadn't. I said so. "But *you* did?"

She nodded. "I saw him. Peter, he was wearing a gray trench coat and a gray hat. He was the man who bit his nails. The man who was in the vestibule of the St. Anton."

That was a shock, and yet suddenly it gave a sort of sense to the fantastic thing that had happened.

"The man from the St. Anton," repeated Iris. "And the bouquet of red roses! The red rose—and the white rose."

We had reached the top floor but one, and were hurrying down a dimly lit hallway when a door opened and a woman in a pink wrapper peered out. In an uneasy moment I realized she was the woman who's buzzer I had pressed by mistake.

I muttered, "Sorry. A mistake. We want Miss Crawford."

She slammed her door shut.

I joined Iris on the top landing. There was only one apartment up there. Its door had the elegantly painted legend: *Eulalia Crawford, Dolls, Inc.* Outside the door, propped against the wall, was a dainty red cellophane umbrella. There was a small puddle of water on the linoleum beneath it.

"See! Her umbrella's still dripping, Peter. That means she hasn't been in long."

Iris looked radiant now. Her finger went forward to press the little buzzer in the doorframe. Shaken as I was, seeing her do that made me sensible again.

"Stop!" I said. "Don't press the buzzer."

Her hand remained poised. "Why ever not, Peter?"

"You've got to be sensible. The man at the St. Anton, he—he mistook you for Eulalia Crawford, the way the Beard did. He saw you reading *The Onlooker*. He followed us to this house. He was sure then, so he shot at you. He tried to kill you because he thought you were Eulalia."

"Bright boy," said Iris. "Go to the head of the class." Her hand moved slowly toward the buzzer.

"Don't, Iris. I'm not going to let you get into this any deeper."

"Nonsense." Iris looked de-

termined. "Eulalia's the only one who can explain. And if you think I'm going through life never knowing why I was shot at you're crazy."

She rang the buzzer then, imperiously. We waited, but there was no reply.

"That's funny."

She rang again. After the drone of the buzzer stopped, a deep silence enveloped the top floor of two-thirty-five.

Iris stooped down then, so that she could see under the door. "The lights are on inside, Peter. And the umbrella's dripping. She *must* be in."

Her hand slipped to the doorknob. She turned it and, surprisingly, the door opened.

Iris stepped into the little hall. This was mad, crazy . . . I followed her, closing the door behind us.

It was an ordinary little hall. But I didn't like the silence. I don't quite know why. Possibly because, if Eulalia was there, she had no right to be so quiet. Ahead of us was the main room, the studio.

We could see only part of it, through the archway leading from the hall. But it was rather a weird sight—because of the dolls. There were dozens of them, sprawled over everything—life-size dolls, middling-size dolls, small dolls, dolls of women in evening gowns, and men in tuxedos, dolls of different nationalities, dolls of clowns, ballet dancers, trapeze artists in tights—every sort of doll. And somehow they were sinister.

Iris was almost on the threshold of the studio. Softly she called, "Miss Crawford."

I tautened. Nothing happened.

Iris stepped into the studio. She made a sound—a sharp, choking sound.

"Iris! What is it? What—?"

I ran to join her. The swarm of dolls stared from their dozens of baleful, sightless eyes. All through those awful moments, I was conscious of them as a sort of horror background. But they were only a background. Because I saw at once what Iris had seen. Part of the studio had not been visible from the hall. It was visible now, all right.

There was a desk—a large, modernistic desk. It was, inevitably, strewn with dolls, little dolls. But it wasn't the dolls. In a chair in front of the desk was a woman. She was wearing a lemon-yellow evening gown. I couldn't see her face, because she was slumped forward, the little dolls clustering around her. But I could see her back. And I could see the knife plunged deep into the flesh between the shoulder blades.

"Peter—is—is she dead?" Iris ran toward the woman, her hand going out.

"Don't touch her, Iris!"

I was at her side. I was look-

ing down at the woman's face. It was in profile, resting on her hands, gazing pointlessly at a little over-turned doll of a blonde woman in spangled tights. That was really the worst moment.

"Eulalia!" breathed Iris.

But I could only think—*Iris.* In those awful seconds the resemblance was like a blow on the mouth. Eulalia Crawford was older, yes. But she was terrifyingly like Iris—the hair, the lovely, serene profile, the way the cheekbones curved.

My thoughts were reeling. Just a few moments before, Iris had been shot at. Why? Because she was mistaken for Eulalia Crawford. That's what I had thought. But . . . what about this? Hadn't Eulalia been dead—even then when the bouquet of red roses was hurled at us from the car?

Iris's voice came dimly: "Peter, the—the man who answered the phone. The man with the stammer. He must have murdered her. He urged me to come. He left the door open so we could get in. Because he wanted us to get in. He wanted people to think that we—" She had moved around the desk. Sharply she called, "Look, Peter! Oh, look!"

I joined her, numbly. She was pointing.

There behind the desk, strewn haphazardly across the carpet in a sort of nightmare canopy, were dozens of roses. But this time the roses were not red. They were white.

Iris's hand went down to the desk, supporting her. There was a blue book lying there with gold lettering. She touched it, and it moved, revealing something beneath it—a piece of paper with writing on it.

Iris picked it up and stared at it. "Peter, she—she must have been writing this when it happened."

Quaveringly, she started to read.

Dear Lina:

I have to write to you to warn you. Because there's danger—mortal danger. The white rose—and the red rose—

Iris handed the letter to me. "There's more. But I—I can't read it." She paused. "Lina! Eulalia—and now Lina, too." She was very pale. Suddenly she said, "Peter, what are we going to do?"

What, indeed? Call the police? That was the normal thing to do when you discovered a body. But could we call the police? What could we say? We had broken into a strange woman's apartment. Why? Because of the red rose and the white rose.

What were the red rose and the white rose? We didn't know. Who had told us about them? A drunken black-beard. Who was the drunken black-beard? We didn't know. Where could

we find him to check our story? We didn't know. Why hadn't we, a reputable play producer and his reputable wife, called the police in the first place if we thought something criminal was afoot? We didn't know. At least, we did know. It was our wedding anniversary, and we thought we'd have some fun. Fun!

The whole madhouse tale scuttled through my thoughts. Who on earth would believe that? Certainly not the hard-headed police.

I glanced at the front door. The sight of it decided me. It seemed to decide Iris too. Almost simultaneously we said, "Come on. Let's get out of here."

Together we ran to the front door. Iris's hand went forward for the knob.

It was then that we heard the scratch of a key in the lock outside.

Wildly I thought, *That other name by the buzzer—Eulalia's roommate!*

The door was pushed open inward. And a woman stood there. I shall never have more than the vaguest impression of that woman. A youngish woman with very blonde hair and very red lips.

She was just as startled as we. She came toward us, staring. Every possible sign of guilt must have been scrawled across our faces. Eulalia's roommate went on staring.

"Who—who are you?" she asked.

Who were we! We stood there, stiff and lifeless as the dolls.

"What are you doing here?"

Then her eyes left us. She gazed into the room beyond. I saw the horror coming into her face. And then she screamed. "Eulalia!" And, with a rising hysterical crescendo, "You killed her! You murdered her!"

After that she wasn't saying any actual words. It was just a long, animal scream.

We were beyond any reasonable process of thought then. The woman's blind terror infected us, too. With amazing teamwork born of panic, Iris and I dashed toward the woman, pushed her aside, and bolted along the landing outside to the stairs. In a split second we were stumbling downward.

III

We were out on the dark street, out in the drizzle—running. And, miraculously, there was a taxi. I hailed it. By a supreme effort we managed to change ourselves into a languid couple in evening dress who nonchalantly needed a taxi.

"Where to?" said the driver.

"Where to?" echoed Iris. "Oh—uptown. Somewhere gay and expensive. The Continental, I think. Yes, the Continental."

That was smart of her. I would have given our home address. Now that we were fugitives from justice that might well have been fatal.

After the horror of two-thirty-five, the impeachably upper-crust atmosphere of the Continental was soothing. We were taken to a table. The lights were dim and the orchestra was playing a dreamy waltz. Everyone was dancing. Dancing seemed a very sensible thing to do. We danced.

I loved it—having Iris close in my arms. For a few misguided moments I really started thinking this was a nice wedding anniversary after all. Then, inevitably, Iris brought us back to reality.

"Running out like that!" she said softly. "We were crazy, Peter. We lost our nerve."

She was soft and warm in my arms. "Yes," I said. "We did."

"That girl who broke in on us, that roommate of Eulalia's," said Iris. "Of course, she thinks we killed Eulalia."

"Yes," I said dreamily. Iris waltzes divinely.

"And when the police come, she'll be able to give them a perfect description of us. So will the woman whose buzzer we rang. And the two taxi drivers—the one who took us there and the one who brought us here. It oughtn't to be hard for the police to catch up with us."

"True," I agreed, worried.

Suddenly I didn't want to dance any more. I wanted a drink. We had the waiter bring highballs to our table. Mine didn't help my mood any. Iris's romantic adventure!

Iris was clasping her drink in both hands, looking ethereal. Slowly she said, "You know, Peter, we've done everything but confess to that murder."

"Exactly."

"Probably the police are after us even now. And it's not only that. The man with the gray trench coat shot at us once. Maybe he wants to shoot at us again."

"Goody," I said dourly.

"And I don't see how we can possibly exonerate ourselves unless—"

"Unless—what?"

"Unless we find out the truth. I mean the truth about the red roses and the white roses. Then we could go to the police and make a clean breast of it."

"And how could we find out the truth?"

"I don't know," Iris confessed helplessly, and then opened her pocketbook. "Maybe this! This letter Eulalia had started to write."

She pulled it out and handed it to me.

I groaned. "So you stole valuable evidence, too! That's another ten years on our sentence."

"I'm sorry, darling," Iris looked rueful. "I just forgot to put it down."

I stared with a jaundiced eye at the brief, cryptic scrawl.

Dear Lina:

I have to write to you to warn you—"

Iris leaned over and looked too. "We know that—about warning Lina of the red rose and the white rose. But that other line I couldn't read. Can you make it out?"

I stared at the sprawling, indecipherable script. " 'The white rose and the red rose are out,' " I read. " 'And the—something . . . The—the crocus is opening.' "

The note broke off there. We stared at each other. "The crocus!" exclaimed Iris. "The red rose—the white rose—the opening crocus."

"The whole damn' botanical garden."

"Lina would know," said Iris. "There's danger for her—just the way there was danger for Eulalia. Lina would be able to tell us everything."

"Lina—U. S. A.," I said. "She's going to be a cinch to locate."

Iris wasn't listening. Suddenly her eyes lit up. "The Beard!" she exclaimed.

"To hell with the Beard," I said.

"But, Peter, the Beard knows everything. *He* could prove our story was really on the level. If we took the Beard to the police, everything might be all right."

"I might remind you that we don't know the Beard's name. We don't know where he lives or what—"

"That doesn't matter." Iris was her old, enthusiastic self again. "There aren't so many black beards in New York." She rose, wrapping her silver fox around her. "Come on. We're going to find the Beard."

Five minutes later we were in a taxi driving back to the St. Anton. I was sure the Beard wouldn't be there any more. But Iris was bubbling over with hope again.

He wasn't at the Opal Room, of course. We weaved through the tables, fine-combing the guests. Then we divided forces and started excavating the lounges. I had no success. I was returning empty-handed to the main vestibule when Iris came running radiantly toward me.

"The doorman!" she exclaimed. "He's a lovely doorman. He got the Beard a taxi about an hour ago. And he heard him tell the driver to go to the Gray Goose."

The Gray Goose was a halfway fashionable night club in the Fifties. We bundled ourselves into yet another taxi and dashed to the Gray Goose.

We didn't check our coats. We went straight into the ball-

room. Two pianos were playing boogie-woogie. A few couples were dancing; but most of them were snuggled up in booths. We started pushing into booth after booth, systematically, peering. And in the last booth we found him.

He was more majestic even than my memory of him. Words could not do justice to the splendors of his beard.

"Hello," said Iris.

Slowly, little by little, he moved his head. Slowly his eyes lit up in a wicked, goatish leer. "Buriful girl," he said.

Iris slipped into the booth, sitting down across from him. I squeezed in after her. She leaned forward, saying urgently, "You remember me, don't you? The Opal Room. You mistook me for Eulalia Crawford."

"Y're not Eulalia Cr'wford." His great hand unfolded from the stem of his champagne glass, groped forward, and fell—flop—on Iris's. "Y're much more buriful th'n Eulalia. Younger. My mistake!"

Such superb drunkenness seemed to nonplus even Iris. "You *must* remember me," she pleaded earnestly. "You told me about the white rose and the red rose."

The Beard's hand left Iris's. He giggled. Then, suddenly, he brandished his arm at a hovering waiter. "Drink!" he said. "Drink for the buriful girl. Champagne."

As the waiter slipped away, the Beard's aimless gaze settled for the first time on me. "Who'sh tha'?" he demanded.

"He's just with me," said Iris. "He's—he's not important."

That was startling, to say the least. Iris was looking rather wild-eyed now. She said desperately, "You've *got* to understand. Please. This is terribly important for us. It's—it's life or death. The elephant never forgets. You mustn't forget. Page eighty-four. You've got to help us."

"Nasty man! Buriful girl." The Beard sank back into his red leather corner. "Tell that man—go away. Won't have him here."

Iris gave a rather sickly smile. Then she leaned toward me and breathed, "It's no good, darling. He just doesn't like you. But he likes me. Maybe, if you go away, *I* can get something out of him."

"But I don't want to leave you with that drunken—"

"Go to the bar, darling," she whispered. "Wait for me there. I'll try to get him to talk."

I went to the bar and, perching myself on a high stool, ordered a highball. I was on my second drink when Iris appeared from the inner room. She was looking a little dazed, but rather triumphant, too.

"What a man!" she said. And then, "But I've got Lina."

"You've got Lina? You mean —you know who she is?"

"No. But I know her name, where she lives. He's terribly canny, Peter, the Beard. He's not telling a thing. But I tricked that out of him. Because he thought it was funny. 'Listen,' he said, 'isn't this funny?' And he chanted it."

"Chanted what?"

"A name. Lina Oliver Wendell *Holmes* Brown. Sixteen-seventeen, Smith Street, Brooklyn."

Iris chanted it, too. Personally, I thought the Beard was right. It was a riotously funny name.

Iris was looking pale. "I've been thinking, Peter. And—and there's only one thing to do. The Beard is hopeless until he sobers up. Now, Lina . . ."

"Lina?"

"Lina knows the whole story. This thing that happened to Eulalia—I think it's going to happen to Lina."

"Of course it is," I said savagely. "She's got the red rose and the white rose and the crocus after her. And, so far as I care, they can all catch up with her and—"

"No, darling. They mustn't catch up with her. Don't you see? Time's everything. Maybe we can still warn Lina in time. And, if we warn her, then she'll have to tell us the truth. That's the only way we can get out of this—this jam."

I was beginning to see. "You want us to go to Lina now?" I glanced at my watch. "Now—at two-forty-five A.M."

"Oh, I know it's crazy. Everything's crazy." Iris's lips were trembling. "But, darling—please go to Lina now."

"Me! You mean I have to go alone?"

"Darling, I can't let the Beard get away now. I simply can't. We need him. I've got to cling to him through thick and thin. But you don't."

I finished my drink in one gulp. I didn't want to go to Brooklyn.

"Peter, I know it's late. But here—" She fumbled in her pocketbook and brought out Eulalia's letter. "If you show her this, she'll know you're on the level. You—you will go, won't you?"

I took the letter. I kissed her. "I'll go."

"Darling!" she smiled. "And, as soon as you're through, go straight back to the apartment. I'll try and get there as soon as possible—with the Beard."

"With the Beard? Do we have to adopt the Beard, too?"

"Of course. Tomorrow morning he'll be sober. Tomorrow morning he'll be worth his weight in roses." Iris was adamant. "Remember, darling. Lina Oliver Wendell *Holmes* Brown."

I nodded. "Sixteen-seventeen. Smith Street. Brooklyn."

"Oh, darling," she whispered.

I kissed her again. She was utterly beautiful and magnificent and exciting. And I left her to the tender mercies of the amorous Beard. I've never hated doing anything so much in my life.

IV

Sixteen-seventeen Smith Street was a squat, dirty house in a row of uniformly squat and dirty houses. The Browns, I discovered, lived in the basement, and judging from the lighted window, someone was awake—either Mr. or Mrs. Oliver Wendell Holmes Brown. I located the buzzer and pressed it.

The door was pulled open almost before I'd stopped ringing. The speed of it all startled me. In the obscure light from the hall I could see the woman who stood there on the threshold only dimly—a dark, fluttering little thing with big, big eyes.

"Oliv—!" She broke off with a birdlike, swooping gesture of her hand. "Oh, I—I thought it was my husband." And then, before I had time to open my mouth, she was explaining nervously, "My husband works late at the restaurant. He—he forgot his key. I was waiting up for him."

We stood there in the dark area, watching each other.

"Are you Lina Oliver Wendell Holmes Brown?" I asked.

"Yes, yes."

Thank heavens, Lina was alive, anyway!

"What do you want?" She started a little chirping laugh and then, as if the unconventional hour of my visit suddenly frightened her, she added jerkily, "What do you want—so late at night?"

"I've come for Eulalia Crawford," I said.

"Eulalia!" The words came in a thin little Phoebe-bird peep, and Lina's small hands took wing again. Impulsively one hand alighted on my sleeve. She was pulling me into the hall. She closed the door behind us. She was almost running ahead. Her face was ashen.

I followed into the living-room. There was too much old-fashioned furniture in it, but it was kind of pathetically neat. There were two framed photographs on the mantel—a photograph of a muscular blonde in tights with a toothy smile, and another photograph of a dark little slip of a thing gleaming with tawdry spangles. That second picture was Lina herself. I could tell. She was older now, though.

She was hovering in front of me, staring.

"What is it? Why did Eulalia send you?"

I thought of Eulalia's letter.

That was as good an opening gambit as any.

I pulled the crumpled piece of paper from my pocket. Watching her, I held it out. "Eulalia wrote this to you," I said.

She stared at the fantastic note. "The white rose—and the red rose!" She looked up. Her lips were as pale as her cheeks. "The roses . . ."

I didn't say anything.

Her tongue came out, wetting her lips. I've never seen such real terror in any human eyes. "The letter isn't finished. It isn't in an envelope. It isn't finished. You — you brought it—" She broke off. "What's happened to Eulalia?" And then, in a small, tortured sob, "She's dead! They killed her!"

How had she guessed that? What was I to say? "Mrs. Brown—" I began, and found it difficult to go on.

She stepped back. "They killed Eulalia. And you brought this letter to me. *You* brought it!" She was still backing away. "You're one of them. You've come to get me, too. The roses . . ."

It was then that the sound of the front door buzzer echoed sharply in the hall. Lina swirled around. "Oliver!"

She dashed away from me, calling her husband's name despairingly. I could hear her little footsteps pattering in the hall. "Oliver!"

I heard the basement front door open.

"Oliver—"

Lina's voice stopped in a little choking gasp. There was a moment of entire silence. Then another voice sounded, a man's voice—a voice that stammered hesitatingly. It said, "H-hello, Lina, d-darling. I'm sure you're g-glad to s-see me."

The sound of that stammering voice toppled me off whatever solid ground there was left. The stammering voice which had answered Iris over Eulalia's phone, the voice of the man who had murdered Eulalia!

I glanced wildly around the stuffy Victorian room. I took a pointless step toward the hall.

And then, ripping through the silence, two revolver shots sounded in brutal, rapid succession. One . . . two . . . just like that.

The nearness of those shrill explosions was appalling. The quiet that came after was appalling, too. And then, sprouting out of that quietness like a thin, weak tendril, twined a small wailing sound that shriveled into a hissing sigh. A sigh—then the small, subdued noise of a little body crumpling to the floor.

All that came in a second. I hadn't time even to move a finger before it was over, and I heard the clatter of footsteps running away from the door.

I dashed forward out of the

living-room into the hall. I knew what I was going to see, of course.

Lina was there, tumbled in a little limp heap by the open front door. There was blood. But it wasn't the blood that was the worst. Thrown over the little prostrate body, like a bizarre funeral canopy, were roses—dozens of pure white roses.

Some of the petals weren't white any more. They were a vivid scarlet where the blood had splashed them. I dropped to my knees, bending dazedly over Lina. The red rose and the white rose—they mean blood!

Vaguely, as I knelt there by the night's second corpse, I realized I could still hear the running footsteps of the murderer growing fainter on the dark street outside. Blindly obedient to impulse, I jumped up and ran out. I clambered up the iron stairs to the street and stood there at their head.

I could just see the man. He was running to a parked car. I could make him out, a thin, tall figure. I had been thinking, instinctively in terms of the man with the gray trench coat, who bit his nails. But, as he reached the car, I caught a glimpse of his profile in the light from a street lamp. It was gaunt and angular, but it wasn't the same profile. He wasn't wearing a trench coat, either. And the most arresting thing about that fleeing figure was his hair. For it was a vivid, gleaming white.

So there were two men with guns abroad that night!

Long before I could have done anything to stop it, the murder car sprang forward and roared away out of sight. I stood there at the head of the iron stairs, trembling under the delayed impact of shock.

The gunfire had not shaken Brooklyn out of its small-hours' sleep. Probably the cavernous pit of the basement had muffled the reports. In any case, the alarm had not as yet been sounded. But soon Oliver Wendell Holmes Brown himself would return from the restaurant. Soon the cry of "Murder" would echo through the night, shattering the stillness, spreading like ripples across a black lake.

That brought me back to thinking violently about myself. Here I was hopelessly committed to this second corpse—I, Peter Duluth, the man who, almost certainly, was under suspicion of one murder already.

There was only one possible thing to do next. Poor Lina was dead, her secret still undisclosed. There was nothing I could do for her. So long as I stayed there I was jeopardizing my entire future and Iris's.

Get away, Peter Duluth. Get away—now. Scram!

I made my second major retreat that night. I walked out on

Oliver Wendell Holmes Brown, the waiter or whatever he was. I left him to face his tragic homecoming—alone.

V

When I let myself into our apartment, it was in total darkness. Iris wasn't there. I turned on all the lights, hating Iris's not being there. It was half past four. Surely all the night clubs were closed by now.

I mixed myself a drink and gulped at it while I paced up and down the room. I was full of forebodings. Iris had already been shot at that night. And the Beard—we knew nothing about him. Why had we assumed so readily that he was a friend? For all we knew, he was one of the gang.

Why had I left Iris to cope with him alone?

I worked myself up into a frenzy of nerves. I'd never felt so helpless. And then, about half an hour later, I heard the incalculably sweet sound of her key scratching the front door lock. I ran out into the hall just as the door opened. And she was there. Iris was there.

She stepped into the apartment and then turned back to the corridor, crooning, "Come on, Pussy. This way, Pussy."

I started toward her, saying, "Iris . . ." Then I stopped dead in my tracks.

Slowly progressing into the room was a large, ponderous figure in black, a figure with the massive dignity of a Supreme Court Justice. But, defying all laws of probability, he was moving on all fours. One large hand padded forward and then another, the substantial rump proceeding soberly behind. The solemn face with its majestic black beard looked unutterably out of place when it stared up at me from six inches above the floor.

The Beard navigated the threshold. Iris closed the door behind him. She turned to me. She looked beautiful but frayed.

"Hello, Peter," she said. "He's been like this ever since we came out of the elevator. He thinks he's a pussy cat."

She was trying hard to smile.

I was still suffering from my gnawing anxiety at her absence. "Where—where have you been?"

"Driving up and down Fifth Avenue," said Iris, "looking for Easter Bunnies."

"You can't see Easter Bunnies in September," I said sensibly.

"*He* can." Iris shot a withering glance at the sportive Beard. "He could see Niagara Falls in Times Square at this point." And then, despairingly: "Peter, *what* shall we do with him?"

"You haven't got anything out of him?"

"Nothing!" Iris wrung her hands. "It's hopeless. I don't

even know his name. He—he just says to call him Pussy."

"Pussy!" said the Beard gravely.

And started a laborious attempt to sit up on his haunches. Fantastically, although I've never seen a drunker man, he had not lost one particle of his dignity.

I looked at Iris over his head. She looked back at me. "At least I managed to bring him home," she said wearily. And then, thinking about me, "But—but Lina. Did you see her? Did you get anything?"

"Lina," I said, "is dead."

"Dead! Iris's lips went pale. "You mean you found her dead like—like Eulalia?"

"She was alive when I got there. She was murdered right under my nose."

Iris's eyes were bleak. Very softly she breathed, "And the roses?"

"Of course the roses. White roses. Her body was strewn with them."

"Peter!"

The Beard, who had been squatting there imperviously, suddenly sat down on the carpet. Iris and I exchanged a harassed glance.

"We'd better get him on a couch in the living-room," said Iris. "I can't bear this—this weaving around."

Somehow we managed together to propel the Beard to a couch. He seemed to like it. He nestled back and closed his eyes.

"Now," said Iris to me, "tell me everything."

I did. I told her that whole miserable Brooklyn saga. When I had finished, we both turned and stared at the Beard.

"He's our only hope now," breathed Iris. Ponderous lids still hid his eyes. Impulsively Iris bent over him, took his large shoulders and shook him. His eyes popped open. "You've got to listen," said Iris passionately. "Lina's dead. Eulalia's dead. The white rose and the red rose—they've murdered Eulalia Crawford and Lina Oliver Wendell Holmes Brown."

"Eulalia," repeated the Beard slowly. "Lina."

"Yes, yes. You've got to help us. Eulalia and Lina are dead—*murdered!*"

The Beard lifted a large hand and started beating solemn, unrhythmical time in the air. "Eulalia, Lina . . . Zelide, Edwina," he said. "Eulalia, Lina . . . Zelida, Edwina."

Iris glanced at me triumphantly. "Tell us," she said sharply. "Tell us. Who is Zelide? Who—is—Zelide?"

The Beard stared. "A bird," he said.

"A bird!" Iris shrugged hopelessly. "Edwina, then. Who is Edwina?"

" 'N elephant," said the Beard promptly. Then his eyes shut once more. He started to snore.

The drunken oracle had obviously said his last say.

"It's no good, darling," I said.

"But—but it's got to be." Iris swirled round. "I've been with him for hours. That was the only time he answered me. Peter we've got to wake him up. We've got to get him sober."

I looked hopelessly at that vast monument asleep on the couch. I said, "We might try black coffee."

"Coffee—yes." Iris became excited. "We'll make some. Right now."

She hurried into the kitchen. I followed. Cans and percolators and things clattered around, and a few minutes later the coffee was done.

We went into the living-room together, Iris carrying the coffee on the tray as if it were butter on a lordly dish.

"I—" she began.

Then she stopped. Because the couch where the Beard had been so epically asleep was empty.

Iris put down the coffee. We both started a feverish and unsuccessful search of the apartment, under the piano and everywhere. We went out into the hall. The front door was open, telling its own story.

"He's gone," wailed Iris.

That was self-evident. The Beard had been far craftier than we had anticipated. He must have pretended to be asleep. And, during the minutes we had spent in the kitchen, he had made his getaway. The priceless bird had flown.

A mean gray stain of dawn was tinging the sky as we went to bed.

The first thing that swam into my consciousness when I awoke again at some indeterminate daylight hour was the rustle of paper. I opened heavy eyelids. Iris was standing by my bed, fully dressed, and indomitably beautiful. But I didn't like the way she looked. It made me suddenly awake. She looked pale and ominous. In her hand she was clutching a morning paper.

"Hello, darling," she said brightly.

"The paper," I said. "Does it say anything about us?"

She didn't speak. She sat down by me and spread the paper out in front of me. It was the front page. At the bottom left corner, I saw the headline screaming about the two mysterious murders. I scanned the column below. There was all the stuff you would expect. Two women killed in different parts of the city . . . white roses strewn over both. Then there was a paragraph. It read:

Miss Doris Lomas, Eulalia Crawford's roommate, surprised two suspicious characters redhanded in the apartment when she returned from a dance. Miss Lomas told the police how she

opened the front door of the apartment and saw a man and a woman actually bending over the body of Miss Crawford. They fled when they saw her. But she was able to give a detailed description of both of them . . .

Detailed description was right! Miss Lomas had a very keen eye. There followed a description of Iris and me, exact to the last zipper.

As I read on, distraught, I reached this:

Mrs. Clarence Stark, who lives in the apartment below, also saw the murder suspects, and her description fits closely with that of Miss Lomas. Already the taxi driver who drove them to Miss Crawford's apartment from the luxurious St. Anton Hotel has been traced. A second taxi is believed to have driven them from the scene of the crime to the Continental. There the trail ends. But the police are sanguine that soon . . .

I stopped. I couldn't read any more. Iris's hand slipped into mine.

"The hunt," said Iris, "is up. The bloodhounds are in full, baying pursuit."

It was so indeed. Our worst fears had been justified. Now we were officially stamped as probable murderers pursued by the Law.

"We've only got a little time," said Iris. "A very little time. And we've got to do a lot of thinking."

"We needn't bother thinking," I said gloomily. "We can save that for the long evenings in the penitentiary."

Iris looked at me and decided I wasn't being co-operative. She went out, and came back soon with a tray of breakfast. Balancing the tray with one hand, she pushed the paper off my lap onto the floor. Then she put the tray down in front of me.

"Zelide," she mused. "The Beard called her a bird. Why a bird? We've got the facts if only we could put them together. The white rose, the red rose, the crocus and—Edwina, the elephant.

She broke off with a sudden little cry. Her body had gone tense. She was staring down at something on the carpet.

"Peter," she breathed, "The elephant!" Then she plunged onto her knees by the bedside. I heard her fingers rustling the newspaper wildly. "Peter! I think I've got it."

I pushed the breakfast tray aside. I rolled out of bed onto the floor beside her. "I saw the advertisement. I never realized."

She grabbed my arm and pointed triumphantly at the newspaper. I stared. Staring back at me from a large ad in the paper were three prancing elephants.

"See, Peter? Eulalia's letter to

Lina. We read it wrong. Eulalia's writing was so bad. We thought she said, " 'The *crocus* is opening.' She didn't. She said, 'The *circus* is opening!' "

Above the elephants, in bold, black letters, were the words: THE CIRCUS IS IN TOWN. GALA OPENING TODAY AT THE LAWRENCE STADIUM.

"That's the clue," breathed Iris. "The circus! Why didn't we guess? Edwina, the elephant. And—and Eulalia had those dolls—those clowns, trapeze artists, and things."

"There was a photograph of Lina in Brooklyn," I cut in, remembering. "A photograph of her all dressed in spangles. She must have been with the circus one time!"

"So must Eulalia. Carnival dolls! Don't you remember how *The Onlooker* said she'd started her career making carnival dolls? That's the tie-up between them. Now the others. Zelide. That sounds like a circus name, Zelide—the bird. Zelide . . . Oh, look, Peter."

Once again Iris was crouched over the paper. She was pointing at the bottom of the advertisement. There, listed with the other attractions, was the announcement: *Madame Zelide, World-Famous Aerialist, with her Amazing Bird Ballet.*

"Zelide—the bird!" exclaimed Iris.

We stayed there crouched together on the floor, staring at each other.

"See how it all makes sense now?" cried Iris. "Eulalia and Lina and Zelide—they must all have been together in the circus."

"And Edwina the elephant?"

That didn't faze her. "Eulalia, Lina, Zelide, and this elephant, Edwina, they all ganged up together and did something connected with roses—something that harmed the man who bites his nails and the man who stutters. That happened in the past. And now the two men are having their revenge." She tossed back her lovely dark hair and looked radiant. "We'll be okay now, darling. Zelide will be able to straighten everything out."

I clambered back into bed and started eating my breakfast. But I wasn't given any peace. Iris clambered onto the bed, too, reached over my coffee for the telephone book and started leafing through it madly.

"What you doing?" I said.

"Lawrence Stadium," she muttered. "Lawrence Stadium . . . Here we are."

She dialed a number. Then she began chattering excitedly into the phone to several different stadium extensions, asking for Madame Zelide. Her face, which had been alight with hope, went grave. Then she turned to me, whispering, "Zelide's not there."

I dunked toast in my coffee.

"Then ask to speak to Edwina, the elephant," I said.

Iris withered me and said into the phone, "Do you know where I could reach Madame Zelide, please? . . . Okay . . . Thanks."

She slammed down the receiver. "Zelide," she said, "is staying at the St. Anton. See how it all ties up?"

"At the St. Anton?"

"That explains what happened to us last night. The two gunmen must have divided up the job. The one who stutters was detailed to get Eulalia and Lina. The one who bites his nails was detailed to get Zelide at the St. Anton. While he was there he saw me, mistook me for Eulalia, and figured his buddy had slipped up on the job. So he tried to kill me. That makes sense, doesn't it?"

Iris picked up the telephone again. She dialed.

After a brief talk with someone at the St. Anton she hung up disconsolately. "It's no good, Peter. Zelide went out last night and she hasn't come back yet—or called."

"I thought as much," I said darkly. "Farewell, Zelide — corpse number three."

She laid her head against my shoulder. It was nice, even though it did get in the way of my breakfast. She seemed to be thinking. Finally she looked at her watch. "The circus begins at two."

"So what?" I demanded.

"So—we go to the circus." Iris pushed herself around so that she was staring vehemently into my face. "That's the only place we can hope to find out anything." She paused. "You never know. Maybe we'll even stumble into the Beard there. Don't they have bearded men in circuses?"

"Bearded ladies, darling," I said. "Maybe that's it. Maybe the Beard is a lady."

Iris patted her hair and looked far away.

"The Beard is *not* a lady," she said. "You can take that from me."

VI

It was about one-thirty when we left the apartment. Iris was elaborately glamorous in an outfit which culminated in an exotic Dietrich veil. I, very Palm Beach and groomed, sported a pair of heavy sunglasses. The veil and the sunglasses were a forlorn attempt at disguise. The aggressive chic was intended to disconcert policemen, too; because Iris had the bizarre theory that the more over-privileged you seemed the less criminal you looked.

We made the circus, unmolested. And the moment after I'd bought ringside tickets and we'd joined the festive throng scrambling into the great stadium I felt more secure.

Iris looked at her watch and

said, "It's going to start any minute, Peter."

"So—what do we do?"

"Zelide, of course." She looked tense through the veil. "We've got to see if she's come. We've got to warn her before the performance begins."

We both looked around through the crowd. Iris said, "Downstairs to the side shows. That's the way to get backstage."

We started wriggling and pushing through children. We were running down broad stone stairs, and finally, with a kind of breathless rush, we reached the broad, long basement where the side shows were.

We stopped then, and stared.

Animals were everywhere, in cages with lurid, jungle backdrops. Macaws, flaming scarlet, were screeching and the tallest man in the world was sharing a sandwich with a tattooed lady. Strolling toward us, hand in hand, were the fat woman, and a little golden-haired midget.

We hurried to the fat woman and the midget. Iris asked urgently, "Where can we find Madame Zelide, please?"

The midget jerked with a tiny thumb over her shoulder. "Dressing-rooms back there, lady. They'll tell you."

We left them and hurried on through the animal cages toward the rear of the basement. There, at the end of the long room, we found ourselves in an insane outcrop of elephants. Elephants were everywhere.

Iris gave a little exclamation, pointed, and breathed, "Peter, look! Edwina!"

I looked, and she was right. The legendary Edwina was quite definitely there. She was in an open stall of her own in regal solitude, a vast brown elephant with tree-trunk legs, vague kindly eyes, and an immense pink ribbon around her neck. A message hung on the stall said in large letters: EDWINA, THE OLDEST ELEPHANT IN CAPTIVITY.

"Edwina," said Iris in an awed whisper, and fluttered with her hand. "If the Beard's right, Peter, she knows the whole truth about the roses."

Edwina lifted her trunk into a sort of essebend, flicked her ears above the pink ribbon, and whistled. And then, from the distant arena, a crash of cymbals blared.

The circus had begun.

I said urgently, "We'd better get to Zelide.

There was an archway ahead. We hurried to it and found ourselves at the mouth of one of the vast entrances to the arena itself. Here there was wild activity as the opening parade started swaying out into the ring.

Iris grabbed a clown. "Zelide?" she said, "Where's Zelide's room?"

The clown pointed backward.

"Down the corridor, first to the left, first to the right—the third room."

We scurried on to Zelide's room.

Iris knocked on the closed door. Nothing happened. She knocked again.

"She's not there, Peter. She—" Impulsively Iris pushed the door inward. I stepped in after her. The room was empty. I closed the door behind us.

The room was tawdry. It smelled of stale make-up. A curtained closet bulged with theatrical costumes. There was a cluttered dressing table. And a mirror above it, encircled with pinned-up photographs.

I went to the dressing table and looked at the photographs. Iris was with me. All the pictures were of the same woman—a blonde with a dazzling smile. They were all signed scrawlingly: *Zelide.* The face was dimly familiar. Then I remembered the photograph at Lina's home.

"We're on the track," I said. "Lina had a photograph of Zelide, at her house."

"And the doll at Eulalia's," breathed Iris. "Do you remember the little blonde doll in tights that was on the desk by Eulalia's head? That must have been Zelide, too."

We looked at each other.

"What are we going to do, Peter? She isn't here. It's no use staying." Then, desperately, "She can't be dead, too."

She broke off. She was looking down at the dressing table. Balanced precariously between jars of cold cream was a brown-paper package. It had Zelide's name on it and a plastering of stamps. It was marked: URGENT, RUSH, SPECIAL DELIVERY.

Iris and I had the same idea simultaneously. Both our hands went out for that package. I got it first. *Rush, urgent . . .* It might be something. It just might.

"Unwrap it!" Iris cried.

I started tearing off the wrappings. "It's—it's only a book," I said.

But I went on unwrapping it. And suddenly we saw the book. It came out with the back of the dust cover on top. It consisted of a single, large photograph of a majestic gentleman with a magnificent, sprouting black beard.

"Peter!" exclaimed Iris. "It's the Beard!"

I turned the book over. I looked dazedly at the title. It said: CRIMES OF OUR TIMES. And, underneath, the author's name: EMMANUEL CATT, AMERICA'S MOST DISTINGUISHED CRIMINOLOGIST.

"The Beard!" said Iris again. "The Beard wrote it. And last night he called himself Pussy, because his name's Catt," she added. "Peter, look. There's a

note clipped inside. Open it, Peter."

My hand was rather wobbly as I moved to open the book. I pushed the back dust cover off, and it flopped limply. And then I gave a grunt of surprise. The binding under the paper cover was blue—blue with gold lettering. That conjured up sharp memories.

"This book!" I said. "There was a blue book with gold lettering on Eulalia's desk. He must have sent each of them a book."

There was a note clipped to the flyleaf. It said, in neat, meticulous handwriting: *See page 84.* Just that. *See page 84.* Period.

"Page eighty-four!" exclaimed Iris. "That's what the Beard said to me. 'I warned you on page eighty-four.' "

I leafed shakily through the book, glancing at the chapter headings as the pages flicked by. One chapter would be called: The Mystery of Something or Other; the next, the Mystery of Something Else. Suddenly I stopped.

On page 84 began Chapter Eleven. And it was called: *The Mystery of the White Rose and the Red Rose.* Penciled into the top corner were the words: *The Red Rose and the White Rose are out. You must realize your danger, Madame Zelide. E. C.*

"Here!" said Iris, awed. "The solution was here all the time in the book."

"Lina can't have gotten her book," I said, "because she had not been warned when I got there."

Tensely we both stared down, scanning the first paragraph of Chapter Eleven. It read:

Perhaps the most fascinating of all modern crimes is the strange case of Tito Forelli, the trapeze artist, who hurtled to his death, at the gala opening of the circus in New York on September 18, 1931. To me, the enduring interest of the case lies in two facts: Firstly, that three women, all telling the same story brought a murder conviction where there was no particle of concrete evidence; secondly that the protagonists of the drama bore the fragrant, fairy-tale names of "White Rose," and "Red Rose." Forelli's partners in the trapeze act, the two Rosa Brothers, inevitably earned their colorful names, since one had bright red hair, while the other was prematurely white. They . . .

Suddenly Iris breathed, "Peter! Listen. Someone's coming."

I started. We both stood there motionless. And, with a queer kind of menacing distinctness, footsteps sounded on the bare cement of the corridor outside. The ominous human *tap-tap,* coming closer and closer, made Zelide's dressing-room a trap.

We had broken in unauthor-

ized. If we were discovered there might be a scene which would make us conspicuous. And, with the police after us, that was the one thing we couldn't afford.

The footsteps were up to the door now. They stopped dead outside. I saw the curtained clothes closet. I grabbed Iris's arm. Dropping the book back on the table, I pulled her with me behind the curtain, clattering it along the iron rail to conceal us.

We were only just in time. As we pressed back against Madame Zelide's downy feather capes, I heard the door of the dressing-room open. Through a little crack in the curtains, I could see the table with the book lying on its crumpled wrapping paper. Then the person who had come into the room walked into my range of vision.

I caught my breath. He was the man from the St. Anton; the man with the gray trench coat; the man who had shot at Iris; the gunman who bit his nails!

Just seeing him was a shock. But there was something else. He was hatless, and for the first time I saw his hair. It was red.

For an excruciatingly prolonged moment he stood there by the table, gnawing at his nail. Then he picked up the Beard's book and opened it.

I saw his fingers turning the leaves rapidly. Then he gave a sharp little grunt. Furtively he slipped the book under his arm. Then, as quickly as he had come, he left.

Iris and I scrambled out of the closet together. Iris said hoarsely, "Peter, did you see his hair? The man who killed Lina and Eulalia had pure white hair, didn't he? You told me. White hair—red hair. *They* are the roses. The two gunmen were the Roses all along. And the roses they threw were a sort of trade-mark."

It had been as simple as that! "The protagonists bore *the fragrant, fairy-tale names of White Rose and Red Rose.*" The two trapeze artists who had murdered their partner, Tito Forelli, ten years ago, had been convicted on the evidence of the three women *"all telling the same story."* The two Rosa Brothers now seemed to be taking a terrible revenge on the women whose evidence had convicted them—Eulalia, Lina, Zelide.

I remembered the Beard's sinister remark: *"The white rose and the red rose are out."* Not out in the garden. No. Out of *prison!*

Iris and I stared at each other. She said, "The Red Rose came here to steal the book because he didn't want Zelide warned. That means Zelide is still alive. That means they're still after her."

Her reasoning was a little higgledy-piggledy, but she'd most likely got the right idea.

Emmanuel Catt must have read of the release of the two Rosa Brothers. He must have realized the great danger for the three women which that release would precipitate and he had sent each of them a copy of his book, to warn them. His warning had failed miserably with Eulalia and Lina. And now the book for Zelide had been stolen.

Zelide might be here any minute. Heaven alone knew where the drunken Beard could be found. Iris and I were the only ones now who could warn her of the terrifying vendetta which had singled her out for its third victim. Zelide's life was in our hands now.

VII

We hurried out of the dressing-room into the corridor with no conscious plan. From far away I could hear the brassy blare of the circus band.

The passage was empty. The Red Rose had betaken himself off as neatly as he had come.

We stood there a moment ineffectually. The band had thumped into *Yankee Doodle.* Somehow that rollicking music in the distance made the immediate silence far deeper.

Suddenly the silence and the loneliness were shattered. From around the far end of the corridor debouched a wild, riotous assembly. In that motley swarm of people I made out the fat woman, the tallest man in the world, a couple of flaxen-haired midgets, youths in green tumbler uniforms, a plump, important ringmaster and a bevy of young, blonde aerialists in feather capes.

They were all in a state of high jubilation. Some were brandishing wine bottles, others were humming snatches of the *Mendelssohn Wedding March.* A fringe of clowns pranced around the edges like excited poodles.

There were two people in the center of the group around whom the gala pandemonium was focused. One of them was a swarthy, Greek-looking man, broad and beaming. The other was a woman whose arm was looped through his—a blonde with a mauve toque perched on stiffly waved hair.

That muscular blonde, that patently just-married blonde on the arm of her happy groom, was to me the sheerest dream of delight. There was no mistaking that flashing, toothy smile which had grinned at me from so many photographs. Zelide at last!

The procession came closer and closer. The voice of the top-hatted ringmaster rose importantly: "Ah, Madame Zelide, you scare us. You are not at your hotel. You do not come for the performance. No one knows where you are. Something terri-

ble has happened to Madame, we say. And now it is this—this happy event — a bride. Madame Zelide no longer." He kissed his own plump forefinger. "From now on, Madame Annapopaulos."

"Madame Annapopaulos!" chorused the crowd in happy unison.

"Ah," said Madame Zelide Annapopaulos coyly, beaming at her groom, "but the circus she still come first. I say to Dmitri, my career she always comes first. I say to Dmitri, whatever happens, I must take the performance. So I come. I am here."

"Madame Zelide is here for the performance," chanted the blonde aerialists in well-trained reverence.

I had never seen so much innocent joy. And the irony of it surged over me. Last night Zelide had been saved by Cupid. While gunmen, out for her life's blood, prowled the elegant lobbies of the St. Anton, she had been amorously, respectably, and securely lodged in the arms of Mr. Annapopaulos.

The procession had swarmed right up to us now and was already pouring past us through the door into Zelide's dressing-room. The happy bride and groom were swept straight past us into the room out of sight.

"Twenty minutes, Madame," said a voice inside the room. "In twenty minutes our ballet goes on. You must be quick. *Quick.*"

They had all vanished from sight into the room now, all except two clowns who stood in the doorway.

Iris said, "Come on, Peter. We've got to warn her before she goes on for her act."

We both started forward toward the dressing-room door. The clowns were still there, standing with their motley, rainbow backs toward us.

Iris prodded at one and said, "Let us by, please. We've got to see Madame Zelide."

Inside the room we could hear loud, raucous laughs and the clinking of glasses. Slowly the two clowns turned around—a blue clown and a white clown. They stood there, blocking the doorway, staring at us.

"Please let us in," said Iris again. "We have to see Madame Zelide at once."

The eyes of the white clown flickered unpleasantly. Suddenly he swung around and shut the door of the dressing-room, so that we were barricaded from the people inside. There were only the clowns, then, and us—no one else in that deserted corridor.

"Let us by—" began Iris.

And then she stopped, with a little piping gasp. Because, very slowly, the white clown lifted a cupped hand to his mouth and gnawed at his thumbnail. The hand stayed there for a split

second, then it swooped down to the broad pocket of his costume. Long before we could do anything, he had whipped out a revolver. He was aiming it directly at Iris.

"One peep out of either of you," he said, "and I'll shoot the dame in the belly."

With the gun still pointed straight at Iris, the Red Rose talked to the blue clown out of the corner of his mouth. "This is the guy and the dame I told you about—the dame I thought was Eulalia last night."

The blue clown shifted sparse shoulders and stammered, "I—I th-thought s-so."

Iris was very pale. Probably I was, too. I thought of Eulalia dead and Lina dead. I looked into those bright, fanatical eyes. The Rosa Brothers had been trapeze artists. Of course, it would have been simple for them to get themselves hired, incognito, at the circus.

I knew just how far to trust that revolver.

"Get moving," said the Red Rose. He jerked his painted head. "Down the passage. Get moving."

We had to, of course. I took Iris's hand. We started down the empty passage in the direction the Red Rose indicated. The two clowns fell in behind. The Red Rose's revolver was pressed against Iris's back.

"Left, here," said the Red Rose. "Down that passage to the left."

We turned into it, Iris and I, hand in hand. It was a narrower passage with no doors in it, a lonely, gray passage.

"If we see anyone," said the Red Rose, "and if you bat an eyelid, I shoot." After a pause, explaining, he added. "I don't know what you know or what your game is. But we got important work to do. We ain't having you or no one else butting in, see?"

We came to the end of the corridor. There was a door, a tall, steel door. Hanging from a hook on the wall was a key. White Rose took the key. He opened the door outward. Inside there were stairs going down into blackness.

"Turn around," said the Red Rose.

We turned around. We stared straight into his clown's face, straight at the revolver.

"Back down those stairs," he said.

We moved slowly backward, down, down into darkness. The Red Rose loomed above. Was he going to shoot now?

The revolver shifted slightly in his hand. He said, "You're lucky you're still alive. Just keep thinking about that."

Then suddenly we didn't see him any more. There was nothing but utter darkness and the vague, musty smells of a cellar.

The door above us had been slammed shut.

I heard the rattle of a key in the lock. Then there was no noise but our own quick breathing. I was relieved because as the Red Rose had said, we were alive.

We stood there, precariously, halfway down the dark stairs that led to—what?

Iris said huskily, "We must find the lights."

Lights—in that darkness!

She started up the stairs again, gropingly. I felt in my pocket for matches. I brought out a box and made a little flickering light.

"The switch must be by the door."

We reached the steel, impregnable door. There was a switch right by it. Before the match sputtered out, I twisted the switch.

Nothing happened.

I flicked it around and around. No light came. It was broken.

Iris said, "We must go down into the cellar. Maybe there's another way out."

We started down the stairs, lighting match after match, penuriously, because there were not very many. We were down in the bowels of the cellar, tripping over old gym horses, slats, broken poles, all the odd, useless junk that ends up in a sports stadium cellar.

Then suddenly, after a match had burnt out, Iris gave a little cry stumbled, and clutched me. "Peter, light a match. Quick. I think there are steps here."

I lit the last match but one. As its cone of flame sprouted, I saw that Iris was right. We were in a corner by the wall, and concrete stairs led up. We scrambled up them. The match went out. Falteringly I lit the last match. I held it above us. The steps seemed to lead straight to the ceiling.

"They must lead somewhere."

Iris was scrambling ahead. She reached the top. "Keep the match alight," she said; and, instantaneously, the match flickered out. There were queer, shuffling sounds in the darkness. Then Iris said, "The ceiling's wood. I think it's loose."

She gave a cry of jubilation. Because suddenly there was light, a square of light. And I saw Iris against it in silhouette. Iris, glamorous, chic, elegant, and disheveled, standing at the top of the steps, her hands above her head supporting a square trap door. There was straw everywhere.

She wriggled herself up. I went after her, squeezing through.

Straw was all around us on the floor. Vaguely I began to realize we were in a stall, an animal stall. With a tingle of excitement I recognized it. It was empty now. But we had been here be-

fore. This was where Edwina, and her train had been.

"Quick," I said, gripping Iris's arm. "We've got to get to Zelide's dressing-room. What's the time?"

Iris glanced at her little wrist watch. "Two forty-five. Maybe it's too late. Maybe she's already in the arena."

Together, we ran out of the open stall, through the great archway and headlong into the entrance to the arena itself. The music was playing, loudly, throbbingly. People were everywhere, stagehands, hangers-on, whatever they were, all crowded around the entrance to the ring.

We pushed into the crowd. Iris was ahead. Then she swung round, clutching my hand. "Look, Peter."

In front of us, almost near enough to touch and yet infinitely unget-at-able, I saw a serried row of hippy, feathered blondes marching smartly away over the red, white, and blue sawdust toward the distant center of the ring. Marching grandiosely at their head, was a single, even more majestically feathered blonde.

Madame Zelide herself!

We were at the very brink of the ring. We started running forward.

Iris called, "Madame Zelide!"

Then she stopped, because someone had gripped her from behind. I was gripped, too.

A voice said, "Are you nuts? You can't go on there. The performance is on."

We swung around desperately and stared at a lot of nondescript men.

"We've got to get to Zelide," I said. "It's a matter of life or death."

One of the men spat. Another man, an old, gnarled man with spectacles, had a newspaper. He was staring at us through the spectacles with a queer, intent sort of stare. He looked down at the front page. "Murder of Eulalia Crawford," he read. "Wanted by the police, a man and a woman answering . . ."

The other men were crowding around excitedly, looking at the paper, too. We stood there, circled by them. For a moment I felt like a trapped animal.

Really before either of us knew it, Iris and I were pushing through the circle, scrambling away and running—running like mad.

"The audience," Iris panted. "We've got our tickets, Peter. That's the best place to lose ourselves—in the audience."

Vaguely I was conscious of confusion, shouts behind us, but we rushed on through the deserted sideshows, past the bored cage animals, upstairs to the actual entrance to the auditorium. I had the tickets ready in my hand. We swung through doors and automatically became anony-

mous, just two molecules in a vast body of people.

VIII

Our seats were ringside seats, I knew—a box. No attendants were around at the moment. Iris and I started down through the tiers toward the front of the great oval house.

In the arena, the feathered, bespangled blondes were splaying out to the rhythm of the band, each of them moving to her own individual hanging trapeze. I could see the stately figure of Madame Zelide herself, bowing in the center of the ring. Very magnificent she looked.

We were down at the front row now. Ahead of us I could see two empty boxes. I didn't know whether one was ours or not. I didn't care. I navigated Iris ahead into one. I followed.

The sound of footsteps and voices came from behind us. Guiltily we spun around. Iris gave a little gasp. I stared, like a fool.

Coming down the steps between the packed rows of seats were a man and four impeccably *Social Register* dowagers. And the man, infinitely respectable in discreet, ambassadorial serge, wore a beard—a black beard, a magnificent, godlike beard. His eyes, perhaps, were ever so slightly rheumy and morning-afterish, but he proceeded down the steps with all the sober dignity in the world.

Emmanuel Catt, America's Most Distinguished Criminologist, had come to the circus. For one paralyzed second, Iris and I stared at him. Then, as one, we pounced.

Iris said, "You! At last we've found you."

The Beard drew himself up. He fixed us both with a cold eye and said, "I haven't the pleasure of knowing you, and there is straw in your hair. Please let me pass."

So he didn't know us! So the Beard, sober among his dowagers, was a respectable Dr. Jekyll who disowned the evil, alcoholic, midnight acquaintances of his drunken Mr. Hyde other self.

"But you must remember us." Iris stared at him. "How could you forget—after last night? Pussy!"

The dowagers gave one glacial, co-operative sniff and swept into the next box. A faint flush tinged the Beard's cheeks. "Ah—last night, I—ah—was not myself."

"But the Rosa Brothers," said Iris wildly. "They've murdered Eulalia and Lina! It was in all the papers! And now it's Zelide!"

"I haven't seen a paper," the Beard said mechanically. Then he realized what Iris had said. "Murdered Eulalia and Lina?" he gasped.

"Yes, yes. And now they're here at the circus disguised as clowns. They're after Zelide. She's right here—out in the ring."

The Beard was utterly shaken. "But she must be mad. I warned her."

Suddenly there came the ominous rolling of drum taps. As one, Iris and I and the astounded Beard swung around to face the ring.

The moment for the great Bird Ballet had come. Like clockwork, with the first roll on the drums, the blonde "birds" lifted their arms and gripped their trapezes. Rather ponderously, they began to swing onto the trapezes and then levitate as the ropes carried them upward. The drums rolled on.

And Zelide still stood there in the center of the ring. A huge trapeze was lowering above her head. The blonde "birds," in mass ascension, soared higher and higher. Vaguely I saw men up there, men in fancy costumes, hanging high up on the ropes, maneuvering them. Zelide gave a final bow.

The trapeze, lowered from above, came closer and closer. She lifted a hand for it.

And then, as the thunderous drum-roll reached its climax, something incalculably unexpected happened. Suddenly, as if materializing from nowhere, there were roses—a shower of roses tumbling down, down, splashing to the sawdust and around Zelide's feet.

Red roses . . . and white roses . . . red roses . . . and white roses . . .

The audience buzzed its approval. A pretty gesture, the final touch of showmanship. But, to us, the appalling, sinister implication of those roses was almost more than we could endure.

And, as we stood there, taut as steel, helpless, Zelide reached for the trapeze. She was easing herself up onto the bar.

It was then that Iris screamed, "Look! 'Way up there in the ropes!"

She stared up. I stared up. The Beard stared up. And we saw them—saw them up there almost at the peak of the giant arched roof. Two clowns, swinging expertly on ropes, close to the cables that supported Madame Zelide's trapeze. Two clowns—a blue clown and a white clown. Clowns who, to the vast audience, were just another prop in the pageant; just part of the act.

The Red Rose and the White Rose.

And, as we stared up, I caught the sudden flash of something in the shaft of light from a baby spot. Something in the hand of the Red Rose—something gleaming and steely.

A knife!

Of course! That was the

crazy plan—to cut halfway through one of Madame Zelide's trapeze ropes, to wait until she started to swing, and let her hurtle herself to her doom.

"Look!" I clutched at the Beard's arm. "The two clowns up there—they're the Roses."

"*They* dropped the roses," said Iris.

"And the Red Rose has a knife. I saw it gleaming. He was cutting through one of the trapeze ropes. Don't you see? When Zelide gets high enough, when she starts to swing . . ."

For one teetering second the three of us—Iris, the Beard, and I—stood petrified in the box.

Then the two clowns started swarming down their ropes. All the other men were swarming down, too, past the ascending blonde aerialists. No one else but us would have singled out the Roses. No one but Iris and I, who were supposed to be safely locked in the cellar, could possibly have guessed what they had done—guessed that, right there in front of an audience of thousands, they have prepared their fantastically brazen and cunning plot to murder Zelide.

The Roses were halfway to earth. Madame Zelide was rocking on the trapeze, ready to make her triumphant aerial ascent.

Overcome with a common, desperate urgency, the Beard and Iris and I started scrambling over the front of the box and dropped down into the ring. Somewhere behind us the Beard's dowagers screamed. It was a fuse setting off a splutter of shouts and calls behind us. But, indifferent to them, we started running over the bright red, white, and blue sawdust toward Madame Zelide and the trapeze.

The drum-roll went on. Slowly, portentously, Madame Zelide and her trapeze started to rise upward, slowly upward. Attendants were running after us now, agitated, angry, with thumping footsteps and hoarse, high voices.

The Beard was ahead, his role of respectable escort to dowagers abandoned. A bearded Jupiter running with the fleetness of Mercury. We stumbled on through the sawdust. The Roses on their ropes were slipping nearer and nearer to earth. They were of vital importance. But first there was Zelide. Zelide had to be stopped in her regal ascent.

We reached the trapeze. The Beard was still ahead. It was a mad, March-hare moment. Zelide was dangling above our heads, getting higher and higher. I saw her tightsheathed legs swinging. I saw the Beard running ahead of me, immensely dignified and portentous.

Suddenly the legs and the Beard made contact. I saw Emmanuel Catt, America's Most Distinguished Criminologist,

leap with extraordinary dexterity into the air. I saw his large hands fold over Zelide's ankles and tug her from the ascending trapeze.

Then, in a wild, farcical heap, the bearded dignitary and the world-famous, would-be-loved aerialist were tumbling together on the sawdust in an inextricable confusion of blonde hair, black beard, and roses—red and white roses.

The ringmaster was shouting and swishing with his whip. The attendants were closing in all around us. The whole vast auditorium was in an uproar.

The whole picture had become a kind of idiot's blur to me. Only one thing was vivid—the realization that the blue clown and the white clown had clambered down their ropes to earth. The two of them stood there for a second, staring at our swirling little group. Then they started running, swiftly for the far exit from the arena.

Vaguely I heard Madame Zelide's voice, high, shrill with furious indignation. Vaguely I heard the Beard's voice, answering gravely. But this was no time for explanations. I rushed to the Beard. I grabbed his arm.

"The White Rose and the Red Rose are escaping," I pointed. "There! We've got to get them."

I had a brief glimpse of Zelide's face, saw it grow pale with horror beneath the sawdust-sprinkled blonde hair. "The White Rose and the Red Rose!" she gasped. "They're *here?*"

That was all, because the Beard and Iris and I were on the run again. The three of us, buoyed up by the wild exhilaration of the chase, started dashing across the huge arena after the fast-vanishing figures of the two clowns.

"Hurry, darling!" Iris cried.

It was surely the maddest race in history. Behind us, stumbling, shouting, panting, came tumblers, attendants, aerialists, everyone and anyone who happened to be around. At first, I think, they were chasing us. Then with a majestic spurt of speed, Madame Zelide, herself, caught up with us. Her tights were twisted, her blonde hair was wild, but she was splendid and formidable, and she was shouting, "Get them! Murderers!"

The gigantic audience had gone crazy. I didn't blame them. They had come to see a circus. Now they had a lunatic track-race on their hands. The roar of them surged over us like a titanic wave.

"The Roses," panted Zelide. "So they try to kill me like they kill poor Forelli. They—"

"I warned you," put in Emmanuel Catt, lumbering at her side. "I sent you a copy of my book with a note. I marked page eighty-four. I never dreamed that you would not read it."

"Nothing I get, no book, no note."

"The Red Rose stole it," put in Iris.

"I should have guessed they were here," panted Zelide, her blonde hair streaming. "Just as I go on, Edwina, she break the line in her act. She charge at two clowns. I should have guessed."

Ahead, we could see the White Rose and the Red Rose. They had almost reached the exit. People were lounging around it, staring blankly. We shouted out to them to stop the clowns. But they didn't get the idea at all. The two Roses slipped into the little group of watchers—and disappeared.

"After them!" I shouted.

IX

We padded on at the head of our motley band. We reached the exit to the accompaniment of a final roar from the circus audience. We plunged into the little tangled group that was clustered there.

I saw a large, swarthy, prosperous man in a cutaway with a pink carnation. Zelide's husband, Mr. Annapopaulos himself!

He pushed to his wife's side. "Zelide, what have we? What then goes on?"

"The Roses," stammered Zelide. "They are out of prison. They try to take their revenge, to murder me."

Everyone seethed some more.

"The clowns!" I exclaimed. "The two clowns who just ran in here. They're the murderers!"

I stopped because another voice broke in harshly: "That's the guy. That guy and that lady —them's the ones wanted in the papers for the Crawford murder."

I spun round, to see the gnarled old man with the spectacles, who had almost captured Iris and me before we got to Zelide. He was pointing at us. And suddenly, from nowhere, three policemen appeared.

I never thought I'd be glad to see policemen. We rushed to them and we all started talking at once. Emmanuel Catt won. The beard gave him added weight in official eyes. Maybe they even knew him by reputation. ". . . tried to cut through Madame Zelide's trapeze rope and kill her . . . attempted murder . . . two other murders . . . desperate criminals . . . disguised as clowns . . . just went through here . . ."

Everyone started chattering then. The gnarled old murder-catcher, in particular. He pointed down a corridor and shouted, "They went that way. Two clowns."

They started running then, the three of them, down the corridor which the old man had indicated.

The Beard and Iris and Madame Zelide and Mr. Annapopaulos and I followed, with the others scrambling after us.

"At least one of them has a revolver," shouted Iris. "They're dangerous."

We sped on, tumbling down one corridor, then another. There was always someone who had seen them, someone pointing ahead and shouting, "That way! That way!"

We passed Zelide's dressing-room—and on. Suddenly, as the corridor wound to the left, I realized what was happening. Obviously the Roses had not planned this escape beforehand. If their cunning project had worked, they would merely have slipped down their ropes, mixed with the throng of other clowns, and actually watched the murder "accident" take place.

Iris and I, by our escape from the cellar, had thrown a monkey wrench into their schedule.

From now on they would have to improvise. But, circus performers from 'way back, they certainly knew all the ropes at the stadium, and they had the key to the cellar into which they had locked us. Almost definitely they would try to escape that way. Down into the cellar, locking the steel door behind them, under the ring, and then up into the animal stalls, far away from the hue and cry.

I pushed through the crowd until I could grab one of the policemen. "Let the others go on," I said. "You come with me. I think I know how we can head them off."

The policeman looked blank but came. In a second we were hurrying back against the crowd, shoving our way forcibly. Iris noticed us first, then Zelide and Mr. Annapopaulos, then the Beard. They too started pushing their way after us.

I caught Iris' eye and nodded.

Soon the crowd, hot on the chase, had swirled on toward the cellar door, abandoning us.

"Quick," I exclaimed. "Get to the animal stalls."

They obeyed me—just because they were too dazed to do anything else. We ran on, down corridor after corridor until we reached the side entrance to the arena. We passed it, hurried under the tall archway, and then, suddenly, we were in the animal stalls. No one was there. No one at all.

Right in front of us, ranged along the walls on either side, were the elephant stalls. And the elephants themselves, their act over, lumbered around in them.

I said, "There's a trap door from the cellar. It comes up in one of the elephant stalls. I'm almost sure they'll be sneaking up that way."

"Which stall?" said the policeman sharply.

I didn't know. I looked at Iris. She was uncertain, too.

"I—I think it was over there." She pointed to a stall to the right.

We hurried toward it, a taut, keyed-up group—the Beard and the policeman, Mr. Annapopaulos with his prosperous arm around his bride's waist, Iris in the Dietrich veil, and me in what was left of my Palm Beach suit.

The elephants shuffled and watched us.

"Yes," Iris said. "I'm almost sure it's here."

She stopped, with a little scream. We all stood petrified in our steps. Because, from behind us, an all too familiar voice had sounded, steely, and very, very low:

"Hands up. Every one of you. Turn around. Stick your hands up."

Slowly, in unison, like some weird sort of circus act, the six of us wheeled around, our hands groping up into the air above our heads. We stood there, staring, the six of us: the policeman, the criminologist, the bridegroom, the aerialist, and Iris and me, the two suckers.

Standing there in front of the other row of elephants and squarely behind two pointed revolvers, were the clowns, the white clown and the blue clown —those nightmare clowns who, once again, had turned the tables.

And it was all so tragically simple. Iris had picked the wrong stall. The Rosa Brothers had come up from the trap door behind us. They had us beautifully under control—but beautifully. Even the policeman was without a plan.

And the Roses were very much on the job. In the grotesquely painted faces the two pairs of eyes were cruelly bright and steady. The Red Rose's pink tongue slid out over his scarlet lips. He was staring straight at Zelide.

"Step forward, Zelide," he said. "Out here, away from the others."

Zelide gave a little moan. Mr. Annapopaulos kept his large arm stubbornly around her waist. Neither of them moved.

"We got you at last, Zelide. Just like we got Eulalia and Lina. Ten years we had to wait —ten years sweltering behind bars where you put us. You—" The eyes were fanatical now, half crazy. "Get forward."

The elephants weaved with their trunks all around us, shuffled their straw, flicked their ears, and looked bored. Somewhere along the line one of them trumpeted and started an uproarious clatter.

Zelide looked grimly at Mr. Annapopaulos. "It is no use, Dmitri. You too must not suffer. I go."

"No, no . . ."

"Yes."

I admired her then. Zelide was a really brave woman.

"Come out, Zelide." The White Rose had the rest of us covered. The Red Rose kept his revolver pointed on Zelide. She took a step forward, very erect.

"This way." The Red Rose jerked along the stalls with his revolver. "Down here."

Zelide moved forward. The Red Rose stepped in behind her. They started up the aisle between the elephant stalls. It was horrible. A sort of mock execution, a terrible, half-mad mockery of an execution.

Zelide moved along. The elephant down the line trumpeted again. Zelide walked more quickly. She reached a stall. The Red Rose was close behind her. Then, like lightning, Zelide dived into the open stall. There was a scuffling and the wild trumpeting again.

Then Zelide's voice screaming, "Edwina! Get him, Edwina! The Red Rose! Get him!"

It was sheer lunacy from then on. The Red Rose stiffened. I saw him jerk the revolver around. I saw his finger on the trigger. A shot was fired. The trumpeting teetered over into a wild, animal scream of fury. Then an elephant was charging —a vast mammoth of an elephant charging, breaking out of the stall, head raised, trunk bristling, a huge, inexorable elephant with an immense pink ribbon around its neck. Edwina!

I saw the Red Rose hesitate, stare in horror at that terrifying sight. Then he started to run, and Edwina was lumbering after him.

"Get him, Edwina. Get him!"

The White Rose still had us covered. At least, up till then, he had. But, as Zelide's voice rang out again, he faltered and glanced over his shoulder. Instantly, all with the same idea, Mr. Annapopaulos, the policeman, the Beard, and I leaped forward, knocked the revolver out of his hand, and tumbled him to the floor.

I scrambled up, leaving the White Rose to the tender mercies of the others. I wheeled around to Edwina. I was just in time to se her head trundle down. Then there was a scream—a human scream. I saw the immense pink ribbon flapping. Then I saw other colors. I saw the white of the clown, waving helplessly in the air, encircled by the viselike trunk.

Zelide ran out of the stall. Iris and I ran forward, too.

For a moment the Red Rose was, madly, up in the air there, screaming. Then he was hurled to the ground.

Zelide rushed forward. "Edwina!" she shouted. "Leave him alone now. Don't kill him. Leave him, Edwina!"

Even in its fury, the elephant seemed to hear and obey. She

backed, trumepting, shaking her trunk.

Zelide and Iris and I rushed forward. The Red Rose was there, twisting and turning in the straw. I pounced on him. He had no strength left. I saw Zelide's eyes gleaming with triumph.

"Edwina—she save me. I know if I can get him to her stall, she save me. The Roses—they remember and hate for ten years. But Edwina remembers forever. Edwina, the elephant, she never forgets."

The others were hurrying to us now, lugging the White Rose with them. I pulled the dazed Red Rose to his feet. We all crowded around.

"Edwina, she is shot. But a little revolver shot—to Edwina it is a mere flea-bite, yes?" Zelide was coping enthusiastically with Edwina.

Edwina seemed to love it. She was puffing a little, but she was perfectly calm again. And her trunk stopped weaving. Ever so delicately, she curled its tip around Zelide's waist.

"Edwina!" we shouted. "Edwina! Bravo, Edwina!"

And, she smirked. I swear she did.

X

There was high festivity and merry-making in the dressing-room of Madame Zelide, world-famous, world-beloved aerialist. The Red Rose and the White Rose had been taken away by the police. Soon we, too would have to follow to the police station. But at the moment our joy was unconfined.

Sweet red wine was pouring with abandon. Madame Zelide and Mr. Annapopaulos, giving vent to their warm Southern temperaments, were kissing everyone at random.

They kissed me, both of them; they kissed Iris. They even dared to kiss the Beard, who dowagers forgotten, was beaming broadly, perched on a stool. Everything was confusion.

No one seemed to realize that Iris and I were still at sea. We'd been through hellfire. We'd run the gamut of every kind of emotion. We'd got straw in our hair—actually and figuratively. But we still had only the mistiest idea of what it was all about.

That didn't seem to matter.

At the peak of the toasts, the door burst open, and the ringmaster, resplendent in top hat and tails, surged in on a wave of enthusiastic blonde aerialists. He rushed to Madame Zelide and kissed her. Then he swept the Beard and Iris and me into a mass embrace.

"You save the circus!" he said. "When it happens, when you tug Madame from the trapeze, I say—the end. The most terrible thing! But now we find the trapeze rope—she was half cut through. Those fiends, those mad-

men! Certainly Madame would have plunged to her death. You save us from the most terrible of tragedies." His enthusiasm mounted: "Free tickets. For every performance I give you free tickets. The best—boxes."

I managed to disentangle myself.

"But if only someone would tell us something, anything. For example: Why did Edwina hate the Roses?"

Madame Zelide gulped red wine and stared. "But they were so cruel to her—always. Edwina, she love Tito Forelli. The Roses hate him. Once they attack him, the two of them together, and Edwina went to his rescue. After that they hate her, too. Always they think out mean, cruel tricks to plague her. Edwina does not forget. No."

"But why," added Iris, in an attempt to get someone to stick to the point, "why did the Roses hate Tito Forelli?"

Emmanuel Catt rose majestically. We were obviously now entering his domain. "That," he began, "is one of the most fascinating cases in criminal history. I have—ah—made a study of it in my book, *Crimes of Our Times*. I shall give you a copy. The murder of Tito Forelli shows the psychopathic jealousy motive coupled with the perfect crime and the relentless Nemesis as supremely as any . . ."

"But it is so easy to say," broke in Zelide, who seemed in no mood to hand over the spotlight to a mere criminologist. "Ten years ago Forelli is the partner of the Roses in a trapeze act. He is the star, by far the best. And the Roses were madly jealous."

"Professional jealousy at it's—" began the Beard.

"And there was Eulalia Crawford, too," Zelide dived in. "The girl who then makes the carnival figures for us. She is beautiful, attractive. And she loves Forelli. That makes the Roses even more madly jealous, because the Red Rose, too, loves Eulalia. The White Rose, he was never so bright in the head, just the—how do you say?—shadow of his brother, ready to do anything for the Red Rose, die for him, kill for him."

"A typical moronic assistant, a gangster's bodygaurd."

"And so, the Red Rose, his jealousy gets stronger and stronger and his hate. And, together with his brother, he thinks out a plan to kill Forelli so that the Red Rose can have Eulalia. The plan, it is perfect, they think. During the trapeze act they will drop Forelli, they will send him hurtling to his death. All the world will think it is an accident, yes— a simple accident. It happens often with aerialists. No one will suspect."

Zelide paused for breath. The Beard charged in: "The perfect

theoretical murder, no evidence, no clues."

"Dmitri, more wine for Mr. Catt," broke in Zelide torridly. "You see, Mr. Duluth, it worked, their plan—yes. And they were proud—proud as clever murderers who would never be discovered. In the papers, everything, it said—accident. Tito Forelli die by accident. Partners absolved. Eulalia then was to be for the Red Rose. But they were fools, stupid fools. For Eulalia hated Red Rose and suspected them.

"She was cunning, Eulalia. She know they are vain, boastful. She praises them, how clever they are, feeds their vanity. There is little Lina, she was with our ballet then, and she was Eulalia's greatest friend. There was I, too. I then was only an unknown little aerialist, and I, too, am a friend of Eulalia's. She comes to ask, makes us hide in a room, and she brings the Roses in. She praises them, so cunningly: *'You are so clever and so smart, so much more clever than Forelli.'*

"And they fall in the trap. When Lina and I are there as witnesses, we hear the Red Rose laugh and say boastfully to Eulalia, *'Sure, we more clever than that Forelli. We fixed him. We got his number okay.'* "

"So Eulalia," broke in the Beard gravely, "tricked them through their vanity into a murder confession in front of witnesses. Although there was no shred of evidence, the three women went to the police. The police believed them. And, afterward, the jury believed them, too. The Rosa Brothers were sent to prison as murderers for ten years."

"And they never forgive us," said Zelide. "Oh, in time we forget. Until this afternoon everything was from my mind. But the Roses never forgot."

So that was it! Sketchily, vaguely as it had been told in competitive duet, the story emerged plain as glass. Two mean, revengeful, small-time crooks who had planned what they thought was the perfect murder, only to be outwitted by three girls.

Two small-time crooks, brooding in prison, harping on their wounded pride and their hatred for the woman one of them had loved and her friends. Two crooks, distorted by their hate, living only for one thing—release and revenge, a second chance to prove themselves smarter than the women who had defeated them.

And the revenge of the Rosas had reaped terrible havoc—for themselves, for two of the women, for all of us. But it was over now, thanks, to Edwina, whose slow, stubborn impulse to revenge had been even stronger than theirs.

Everyone, the ringmaster, the fluttering blonde "birds," Mr. Annapopaulos, they had all been listening to that strange tale in rapt astonishment.

But the Beard was now the central figure. He stood in Jove-like splendor, twisting the glass of cheap red wine rather shudderingly. I could imagine how he felt about it after last night's champagne.

"All along," he said, "since my study of the case, I felt there would be great danger when the Rosa Brothers were released. I know their type—the little Caesars, the little men with the big egos and a vast capacity for hate and revenge. Yesterday I tried to warn the three women. I should have done much more. But last night I—was unfortunately not quite myself."

He paused there and looked at Iris. The black beard twitched. Slowly, almost infinitesimally, an eyelid lowered in a wink. It was clear that Emmanuel Catt's lamentable exuberance of the night before was to be our own particular little secret.

"I admit I was a failure, a tragic failure," he said. "But now I drink to the two people who, knowing nothing at all about the issues at stake, managed, by their ingenuity and their courage, at least to save—Madame Zelide. I propose a toast. I toast the two most resourceful people I have ever encountered. I toast Mr. and Mrs. Duluth!"

Everyone grabbed glasses, even the respectful blonde aerialists. There were shouts, applause, confusion. Glasses were waved on high. Feather capes fluttered.

I turned to look at Iris. How did she manage to be so utterly beautiful after all we'd been through? I lifted my glass to her. She lifted hers to me. She smiled—that quick, dazzling smile which always catches the breath right out of me.

"Mr. and Mrs. Duluth," she breathed. "Twelve months later, darling—and it still sounds voluptuous."

I leaned forward and kissed her. Her lips were so soft and warm, so very, very right.

"Mr. and Mrs. Duluth!" shouted the blonde "birds" with an abandon which almost certainly stemmed from the red wine. "Bravo, Mr. and Mrs. Duluth! Bravo!"

I hated taking my lips away from Iris's. I could have done without the ecstatic aerialists, too, and Madame Zelide, and Mr. Annapopaulos, and the ringmaster, and the Beard.

But I didn't really care. Because, suddenly, I was sure of one thing. Against all odds, it had turned out to be a good wedding anniversary, after all. It certainly had.

An honest-to-goodness, super-colossal wedding anniversary!

the harmonica mystery

by . . . P. G. Wodehouse

Murder and music may be worlds apart—or closer than a weapon of death, and the hand that wields it.

THE ROOM was the typical bedroom of the typical better-class boarding-house, furnished, in so far as it could be said to be furnished at all, with a severe simplicity.

Its precise appurtenances might have been guessed at from the other side of the closed door. But there was that on the floor which set this particular room apart from a thousand others of the same kind.

Flat on his back, with his hands tightly clenched and one leg twisted oddly under him and with his teeth gleaming through his black beard in a horrible grin, Captain John Gunner stared up at the ceiling with eyes that saw nothing.

Until a moment before he had had the little room all to himself. But now two people were standing just inside the door, looking down at him.

One was a large policeman, who twisted his cap nervously in his hands. The other was a tall, gaunt old woman in a rusty black dress, who gazed with pale eyes at the dead man.

If it would surprise and delight you to be marooned on a desert island with P. G. Wodehouse, with his gifts of humor unsurpassed, a further surprise awaits you here. For the famous Mr. Wodehouse could dispel your tedium quite as miraculously with a crime entertainment of his own inimitable choosing, with just such qualities of suspense, terror and unmitigated skullduggery as you'll find chillingly set forth in this superb mystery yarn.

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Her face was quite expressionless.

The woman was Mrs. Pickett, owner of the Reefton Boarding-house. The policeman's name was Grogan. He was a genial giant, a terror to the riotous element of the Long Island waterfront, but obviously ill at ease in the presence of death.

He drew in his breath with a curious hissing sound, wiped his forehead, and whispered: "Look at his eyes, ma'am!"

Mrs. Pickett had not spoken a word since she had brought the policeman into the room, and she did not do so now.

Officer Grogan looked at her quickly from under his bushy, heavily-knitted brows. He was afraid of Mother Pickett, as was everybody else along the waterfront. Her silence, her pale eyes, and the quiet decisiveness of her personality cowed even the tough old salts who patronized the Reefton. She was a formidable influence in that little community of sailormen.

"You've phoned for the doctor, ma'am?"

Mrs. Pickett nodded.

The breeze, blowing in through the open window, brought with it the sound of noisy laughter. A cheerful voice was singing a popular song.

"That's just how I found him," said Mrs. Pickett. She did not speak loudly, but her voice made the policeman start.

He wiped his forehead again. "It might have been apoplexy," he hazarded.

Mrs. Pickett said nothing.

"Some guys drop in their tracks on account of a bum heart," he went on. "There's no marks on him."

The old woman did not answer.

There was the sound of footsteps outside, and a young man entered, carrying a black bag.

"Good morning, Mrs. Pickett. I was told that—Good Lord!"

The young doctor dropped to his knees beside the body and raised one of the arms. After a moment he lowered it gently to the floor, and shook his head in grim resignation.

"He's been dead for hours," he announced. "When did you find him?"

"Twenty minutes back," said the old woman. "I guess he died last night. He never liked to be called in the morning. He preferred to sleep on until noon. Well, he's got his wish."

"What did he die of, doc?" asked the policeman.

"It's impossible to say without an examination," the other replied. "It looks like a stroke, but I'm pretty sure it isn't. It might be a coronary attack, but I happen to know his blood pressure was normal, and his heart sound. He called in to see me only a week ago, and I examined him thoroughly. But

sometimes you can be deceived. The inquest will tell us."

He eyed the body almost resentfully.

"It really beats me," he said. "The man had no right to drop dead like this. He was a tough old sailor who ought to have been good for another twenty years. If you want my honest opinion—though I can't possibly be certain until after the inquest—I should say he had been poisoned."

Officer Grogan gave a violent start, but Mrs. Pickett only stared.

"How would he be poisoned?" she asked, quietly.

"That's more than I can tell you. There's no glass about that he could have drunk from. He might have got it in capsule form. But I can't imagine why he should have done it? He was always a pretty cheerful old cuss, wasn't he?"

"Sure!" said Officer Grogan. "He was hot-tempered too. I've had guys come to me all battered up from being mixed up in arguments with him. He had a way with him—kind of sarcastic. But he never tried it on me."

"He must have died quite early last night," said the doctor.

He turned to Mrs. Pickett. "What's become of Captain Muller? If he shares this room he ought to be able to tell us something about it."

"Captain Muller spent the night with some friends in Brooklyn," Mrs. Pickett replied. "He left right after supper, and hasn't returned."

The doctor stared thoughtfully about the room, frowning.

"I don't like it. I can't understand it. If this had happened in India I should have said the man had died from some form of snakebite. I was out there for two years, and I've seen a hundred cases of it. The poor devils all looked just like this. But the thing's ridiculous. How could a man be bitten by a snake in a waterfront boarding-house? Was the door locked when you found him, Mrs. Pickett?"

Mrs. Pickett nodded. "I opened it with my own key. I had been calling to him, and he did not answer, so I thought something was wrong."

The policeman spoke: "You have not touched anything, ma'am? They're mighty particular about that. If doc's right, and there's questions to be asked, that's the first thing they'll think of."

"Everything is just as I found it."

"What's that on the floor beside him?" the doctor asked.

"Only his harmonica. He liked to play it of an evening in his room. I've had complaints about it from some of the gentlemen. But I refused to interfere, so long as he didn't play too late."

"Seems as if he was playing

it when—it happened," Officer Grogan said. "That don't look much like suicide, doc."

"I didn't say it was suicide."

Grogan whistled. "You don't think—"

"I'm not thinking anything—until after the inquest. All I say is that it's queer."

Another aspect of the matter seemed to strike the policeman.

"I guess this ain't going to help the Reefton any, ma'am," he said sympathetically.

Mrs. Pickett shrugged her shoulders.

"I suppose I'd better make my report to the police," said the doctor.

He went out, and after a momentary pause the policeman followed him. Officer Grogan was not greatly troubled with nerves, but he felt a decided desire to be somewhere where he could not see the dead man's staring eyes.

Mrs. Pickett remained where she was, looking down at the still form on the floor. Her face was expressionless, but inwardly she was tormented and alarmed. It was the first time such a thing as this had happened at the Reefton, and, as Officer Grogan had hinted, it was not likely to increase the attractiveness of the house in the eyes of possible boarders.

It was not the threatened pecuniary loss which was troubling her. As far as money was concerned, she could have retired from business years before, and lived comfortably on her savings, for she was richer than most of her friends supposed. It was the blot on the escutcheon of the Reefton—the stain on its reputation—which was tormenting her.

The Reefton was her life. Starting many years before, beyond the memory of the oldest boarder, she had built up a model establishment, the fame of which had been carried to every corner of the world.

In saloons and places where sailormen gathered from Liverpool to Hong Kong, from Cape Town to Marseilles, the reputation of the Reefton was of pure gold. Men spoke of it as a place where you were well fed, cleanly housed, and where petty robbery was unknown.

Such was the chorus of praise that it is not likely that much harm could come to Reefton's from a single mysterious death. But Mother Pickett was not consoling herself with such reflections. She was wounded in her pride. Her house had been without blemish; now it was under a cloud.

She looked at the dead man with pale, grim eyes. Out in the hallway the doctor's voice further increased her despair. He was talking to the police on the telephone, and she could distinctly hear his every word.

II

The offices of the Paul J. Snyder Detective Agency had grown in the course of a dozen years from a single room to an impressive suite bright with polished wood, clicking typewriters, and other evidences of success. Where once Mr. Snyder had sat and waited for clients and attended to them himself on the rare occasions when they arrived in person, he now sat in his private office and directed eight assistants.

He had just accepted a case—a case that might be nothing at all or something exceedingly big. It was on the latter possibility that he had gambled.

The fee offered was, judged by his present standards of prosperity, small. But the bizarre facts, coupled with something in the personality of the client, had won him over. He briskly touched the bell and requested that Mr. Oakes should be sent in to him.

Elliott Oakes was a young man who both amused and interested Mr. Snyder, for though he had only recently joined the staff, he made no secret of his intention of revolutionizing the methods of the agency.

Mr. Snyder himself, in common with most of his assistants, relied for results on hard work and plenty of common sense. He had never been a detective of the showy type. Results had justified his methods. But he was perfectly aware that young Mr. Oakes looked on him as a dull old man who had been miraculously favored by luck.

Mr. Snyder had selected Oakes for the case in hand principally because it was one where inexperience could do no harm, and where the brilliant guesswork which Oakes preferred to call his inductive reasoning might achieve an unexpected success.

It was one of those bizarre cases which might call for the over-confident amateur rather than the dogged rule-of-thumb professional. Mr. Snyder had, moreover, a kind of superstitious faith in the luck of the beginner.

Another motive actuated Mr. Snyder in his choice. He had a strong suspicion that the conduct of this case was going to have the beneficial result of lowering Oakes's self-esteem. If failure achieved this end, Mr. Snyder felt that failure, though it would not help the agency, would not be an unmixed ill.

The door opened and Oakes entered tensely. He did everything tensely, partly from a natural nervous energy, and partly as a pose. He was a lean young man, with dark eyes and a thin-lipped mouth, and he looked quite as much like a typical detective as Mr. Snyder looked like a comfortably prosperous stock-broker.

Mr. Snyder had never bothered himself about the externals of his profession. Indeed, one could imagine Mr. Snyder in his moments of leisure watching a ball game with simple, self-evident enjoyment. Oakes gave the impression of never having known a moment of leisure.

"Sit down, Oakes," said Mr. Snyder. "I've a job for you."

Oakes sank into a chair in a crouch and placed the tips of his fingers together. He nodded curtly. It was part of his pose to be keen and silent.

"I want you to go to this address,"—Mr. Snyder handed him an envelope—"and look around. Whether you will find out anything, or whether there's anything to find out, I simply don't know. When the old lady was telling me the story I'll admit I was carried away. She made it sound convincing. She thinks it was murder. I don't know what to think."

"The facts?" said Oakes briefly.

Mr. Snyder smiled quietly to himself. "The address on that envelope is of a boarding-house on the waterfront, down in Long Island. You know the sort of place—retired sea captains and so on live there."

"It's all most respectable, I understand. Don't leave here with the idea that I'm sending you to some melodramatic Hell's Kitchen where the guests are drugged and shanghaied on the day of their arrival. As far as I can gather, this place is a sort of male Martha Washington. In all its history nothing more sensational has happened than a case of suspected cheating at pinocle. But now—a man has died there." He passed his hand over his hair.

"Murdered?" Oakes asked.

"I don't know. That's for you to find out. The medicos left it open. I don't see how it could have been murder. The door was locked on the inside, so nobody could have got in."

"The window?"

"The window was open, granted. But the room is on the first floor. Anyway, you may dismiss the window. I remember the old lady saying there was a bar across it, and that nobody could have squeezed through."

Oakes's eyes glistened. He was interested. "What was the cause of death?" he asked.

Mr. Snyder coughed. "Snake-bite," he said.

Oakes's careful calm deserted him. He uttered a cry of astonishment. "Why, that's incredible!"

"It's the literal truth," Mr. Snyder assured him. "The medical examination proved that Gunner was killed by snake-poison. To be exact, the poison of a snake known as the krait. In a Long Island boarding-house, in a room with a locked door, this man was stung by a krait. It's a

small snake, found principally in India."

Mr. Snyder nodded grimly. "And just to add a little mystification to the limpid simplicity of the affair, when the door was opened there was no sign of any snake. It couldn't have escaped through the door, because the door was locked. It couldn't have crawled up the chimney, because there was no chimney. And it couldn't have got out of the window, because the window was too high up, and snakes can't jump. So there you have it."

He looked at Oakes with a certain quiet satisfaction. It had come to his ears that Oakes had been heard to complain of the infantile simplicity, unworthy of a man of his attainments, of the last two cases to which he had been assigned. He had even said that he hoped some day to be given a problem which should be beyond the reasoning powers of a child of six.

It seemed to Mr. Snyder that Oakes was about to get his wish.

"I should like further details," said Oakes, a little breathlessly.

"You had better apply to Mrs. Pickett, who owns the boarding-house," Mr. Snyder said. "It was she who put the case in my hands. She is convinced that it is murder. But, if we exclude ghosts, I don't see how any third party could have taken a hand in the thing at all. However, she wanted a man from this agency, and was prepared to pay for him, so I promised her I would send one. It is not our policy to turn business away.

He smiled wryly. "In pursuance of that policy I want you to go, and put up at Mrs. Pickett's boarding-house and do your best to enhance the reputation of our agency. I would suggest that you pose as a ship's chandler or something of that sort. You will have to be something maritime or they'll be suspicious of you."

"And if your visit produces no other results, it will at least enable you to make the acquaintance of a very remarkable woman. I commend Mrs. Pickett to your notice. By the way, she says she will help you in your investigations."

Oakes laughed shortly. The idea amused him.

"It's a mistake to scoff at amateur assistance, son," said Mr. Snyder in the benevolently paternal manner which had made a score of criminals refuse to believe him a detective until the moment when the handcuffs snapped on their wrists. "Crime investigation isn't an exact science. Success or failure depends in a large measure on applied common sense, and the possession of a great deal of special information. Mrs. Pickett knows certain things which neither you nor I know, and it's just possible that she may have some

stray piece of information which will provide the key to the entire mystery."

Oakes laughed again. "It is very kind of Mrs. Pickett," he said. "But I prefer to trust to my own methods."

"That's entirely up to you. But remember that a detective is only a man, not an unabridged encyclopedia. He doesn't know everything. In fact, it may be some one, very small thing which he does not know which turns out to be the missing letter in the combination."

Oakes rose, his face purposeful. "I'd better be starting at once," he said, "I'll send you reports from time to time."

"Good. The more detailed the better," said Mr. Snyder genially. "I hope your visit to the Reefton will be pleasant. If you run across a man with a broken nose who used to take pride in the name of Horse Face Simmons, give him my best regards. I had the pleasure of sending him to prison a few years ago for a warehouse robbery and I've been told that he has settled in the neighborhood. And cultivate Mrs. Pickett. She's decidedly worthwhile."

The door closed, and Mr. Snyder lighted a fresh cigar.

"The incredibly conceited young fool!" he murmured, and turned his attention to other matters.

Oakes was unimportant, really.

III

The following afternoon Mr. Snyder sat in his office reading a typewritten report, which had arrived only an hour before by special delivery. It appeared to be of a humorous nature, for as he read chuckles escaped him and when he reached the last sheet, he threw back his head and laughed unrestrainedly.

Yet, paradoxically enough, the report had not been intended to convey the slightest hint of humor. What Mr. Snyder had been reading was, in fact, the first of Elliott Oakes's reports from the Reefton. It read as follows:

I am sorry to be unable to report any real progress. I have formed several theories, but up to the present I cannot honestly say that I am hopeful. As soon as I arrived here I sought out Mrs. Pickett. She is a strange, silent woman, and your suggestion that I should avail myself of her assistance seems more curious than ever now that I have met her.

She is a hard-working woman, who certainly conducts this boarding-house with remarkable efficiency. But she does not appear to be overburdened with brains. She never speaks except when spoken to, and even then is abrupt to the point of unintelligibility.

However, I managed to extract

from her a good deal of information, which may conceivably prove useful. But at the moment the whole affair seems to me quite inexplicable. Assuming that Captain Gunner was murdered, there appears to have been no motive for the crime whatever.

I have made careful inquiries about him, and find that he was a man of fifty-five who had spent nearly forty years of his life at sea, the last dozen in command of his own ship. He was of a somewhat overbearing disposition, though with a fund of rough humor. He had traveled all over the world, and had been an inmate of the Reefton for about ten months. He had a small annuity, and no other income at all, which disposes of money as the motive of the crime.

In my character of James Burton, a retired ship's chandler, I have mixed with the other boarders, and gained their confidence.

I gather that the deceased was the opposite of popular. He appears to have been combatively anti-social and I have not met one man who seems to regret his death.

On the other hand, I have heard nothing which would suggest that he had any active and violent enemy. He was simply the unpopular boarder—there is always one in every boarding-house—but nothing more.

I have seen a good deal of the man who shared his room—another sea captain, named Muller. He is a big, silent man, and it is not easy to get him to talk.

As regards the death of Captain Gunner, it seems that on the night of the tragedy he was away at Brooklyn with some friends. All I have got from him is some information as to Gunner's habits, which leads nowhere. The dead man seldom drank except at night, when he would take some whiskey. Two or three drinks was enough to make him slightly intoxicated, when he would become hilarious and often insulting. There can be no doubt that Muller found him a difficult roommate, but he is one of those placid persons who can put up with anything. He and Gunner were in the habit of playing checkers together every night in their room, and Gunner had a harmonica which he played frequently.

Apparently, he was playing it very soon before he died, which is significant, and would seem to dispose of the idea of suicide.

But if Captain Gunner did not kill himself, I cannot imagine who did kill him, or why he was kileld, or how.

As I say, I have one or two theories, but they are in a very nebulous state. The most plausible is that on one of his visits to India—I have ascertained that he made several trips there—

Captain Gunner may in some way have fallen foul of the natives.

Kipling's story "The Mark of the Beast," is suggestive. Is it not possible that Captain Gunner, a rough, overbearing man, and easily intoxicated, may with drunken bravado have offered some insult to an Indian god?..

The fact that he certainly died of the poison of the krait, an Indian snake, supports this theory.

I am making inquiries as to the movements of several Indian sailors who were here in their ships at the time of the tragedy.

I have another theory. Does Mrs. Pickett know more about this affair than she is willing to admit?

I may be wrong in my estimate of her mental qualities. Her apparent stupidity may be cunning.

But here again the absence of motive brings me up against a stone wall. I must confess that at present I do not see my way clearly. However, I will write again shortly.

Mr. Snyder derived the utmost enjoyment from the report. He liked the substance of it, and above all, he was tickled by the bitter tone of frustration and oddly irate verbosity which characterized it. Oakes was baffled, and his knowledge of Oakes told him that the sensation of being baffled was a bitter pill for that high-spirited young man to swallow. Whatever might be the result of this investigation, it would at least have the effect of showing Oakes that there was more in the art of criminal investigation that he had supposed. It would teach him the virtue of patience.

He wrote his assistant a short note:

Dear Oakes:

Your report received. You certainly seem to have the hard case which you were so eager to undertake. I wish you luck.

Don't build too much on plausible motives in a case of this sort. Fauntleroy, the London murderer, killed a woman for no other reason than that she had thick ankles. Many years ago I myself was on a case where a man murdered an intimate friend because of a dispute about a ball game.

My experience is that five murderers out of ten act on the impulse of the moment, without anything, which, properly speaking, you could call a motive at all.

Yours very cordially,

PAUL SNYDER.

P.S. I don't think much of your Pickett theory. However, that's your headache now. Enjoy yourself.

IV

Young Mr. Oakes, however, did not enjoy himself. For the first time in his life, the self-

confidence which characterized all his actions seemed to be failing him.

The change had taken place almost overnight. The fact that the case had the appearance of presenting unusual difficulties had merely stimulated him at first, for he had resented being assigned to investigations which offered no scope for the inductive genius which he flattered himself that he possessed. Hitherto he had been a razor cutting wood. Then suddenly he had found himself in the position of being able to really show Mr. Snyder the difference between modern methods, and the stupid rule-of-thumb which seemed to be the agency's sole means of achieving results.

Such had been his mood at first. But almost overnight doubts had crept in and the problem had begun to appear insoluble.

True, he had only just taken it up. But something told him that, for all the progress he was likely to make, he might just as well have been working on it steadily for a month. He was completely baffled.

And every moment which he spent in the Reefton Boarding-house made it clearer to him that the disturbingly observant old woman with the pale eyes thought him an incompetent fool. It was this, more than anything, which made him acutely conscious of his lack of success. His nerves were being sorely troubled by the quiet scorn of Mrs. Pickett's gaze. He began to think that perhaps he had been a shade too self-confident and abrupt in the short interview which he had had with her on his arrival.

She had struck him as a thoroughly stupid old woman, and his manner had mirrored his contempt.

He had been keen but almost insulting during that interview. He had cut in impatiently on her remarks. He had examined her with regard to the facts which he needed to supplement those which he had received from Mr. Snyder with a superciliousness which he was now beginning to regret.

Such an attitude could only be justified by results, and the fear was creeping over him that he could not deliver. Failure was staring him in the face so starkly that he had begun seriously to brood over his youthful appearance. Mrs. Pickett's pale eyes somehow made him feel very young.

As might have been expected his first act after his brief interview with Mrs. Pickett was to examine the room where the tragedy had taken place. The body was gone, but otherwise nothing had been moved.

Oakes belonged to the laboratory analysis school of crime detection. The first thing he did

on entering the room was to make a careful examination of the floor, the walls, the furniture, and the window-sill. He would have hotly denied the assertion that he did this because it was expected of him and looked well, but he would have found it difficult to advance any other explanation.

He discovered what probably in his heart he had expected to discover from the first—nothing. There were particles of dust on the floor, but they brought him no enlightenment. There were marks on the window-sill, but what they signified he had no notion. However, he went through his performance conscientiously. It was his way of taking formal possession of the case.

He rose, a little flushed, and, abandoning his laboratory attitude, made a comprehensive survey of the room from a position near the door. If he discovered anything, his discoveries were entirely negative, and served only to deepen the mystery of the case.

As Mr. Snyder had said, there was no chimney, and nobody could have entered through the locked door.

There remained the window. It was small, and apprehensiveness, possibly on the score of burglars, had caused Mrs. Pickett to make it doubly secure with an iron bar. No human being could have squeezed his way through so small an aperture.

After a quarter of an hour Oakes left the room, locking the door behind him. No more unsatisfactory preliminary investigation could ever have been undertaken by a representative of a detective agency with a reputation for diligence in the pursuit of crime.

It was late that night that he wrote and dispatched to the agency the report which had so amused Mr. Snyder. The interval he filled up by making guarded inquiries among his fellow boarders.

Fortunately he had no difficulty in making them talk. Nothing like the death of Captain Gunner had ever happened amongst them, and the difficulty would have been to start successfully any other topic of conversation.

Captain Muller, who had been the dead man's roommate, might —if he had so desired—have covered himself with glory as the principal speaker and star-witness. But he was the only man who seemed to have nothing to say. He was plainly a man of reserved temperament, and not even his vicarious connection with the tragedy could shake his stubborn reticence.

The theories of the others ranged from a heart attack—in spite of the doctor's definite assurances to the contrary—to the

ingenious suggestion from one of the boarders that Captain Gunner had been bitten by a snake at some previous date, several years before, and that the poison had lain dormant in his system until the moment of the tragedy.

The theorist claimed to have known a man who had made a voyage with an unfortunate individual to whom a precisely similar experience had happened. The only weak spot in the story was the fact that the speaker's informant had the reputation of being the most persevering liar in his native state of Massachusetts, and had twice claimed to have seen a sea-serpent.

Young Mr. Oakes went to his room with the beginnings of a bad headache. All the really reliable information which he had acquired from his companions he had embodied in his report, and, as he had admitted in that document, it did not lead to anything very definite.

It was in his room that he first snatched at the avenging East Indian theory as a possible solution. Nothing supported the theory except his active imagination, and if he had been honest with himself he would have cheerfully admitted that there was a good deal of the emotions of the drowning man toward the proverbial straw in his attitude toward it.

Captain Gunner had certainly visited India in the course of his wandering. But there the trail quite definitely stopped. He had never displayed any of the brooding uneasiness which might be supposed to mark a man conscious of being ceaselessly pursued by the outraged servants of an Indian god.

In his rambles along the waterfront he had frequently met East Indians, but from all accounts he had betrayed no nervousness. On the contrary, if they happened to get in his way, he had treated them civilly and on friendly terms without exhibiting the slightest fear.

Oakes was bound to admit that his confidence in the East Indian theory was not very robust. He had broached it to Mr. Snyder in his report more to convince him that he was bringing a laudable nimbleness of imagination to his task than because he really believed it.

His innuendoes against Mrs. Pickett were inspired by less laudable motives. The woman irritated him profoundly, and it soothed his vanity to fancy himself watching her like a hawk night and day, and causing her uneasiness by his relentless pursuit.

Certainly Elliott Oakes was not enjoying himself. The man of all others whom he had admired and revered most intensely all his life—to wit, Elliott Oakes—was beginning to show signs

of not being so infallible as he had supposed.

He was being tried and found wanting, and it was a very uncomfortable experience indeed.

V

Two days later Mr. Snyder sat at his desk, staring with wide, unbelieving eyes at a telegram he had just received. It read as follows: *Have solved Gunner Mystery. Returning . . .* OAKES.

Mr. Snyder narrowed his eyes and spoke decisively into the intercom at his elbow. "Send Mr. Oakes to me the instant he arrives," he said.

He put his feet up on the desk, tilted his chair back, and glared at the ceiling.

He was pained to find that his chief emotion was one of bitter annoyance. The swift solution of such an apparently insoluble problem would reflect the highest credit on the agency. Morever, there were dramatic and unusual circumstances connected with the case, which would be seized upon by the newspapers and lead to its being given a great deal of publicity.

On the whole, no case in recent years promised to give the agency more favorable publicity than this one. Yet, in spite of all this, Mr. Snyder was annoyed. It was ridiculous and unprofessional of him to be annoyed, but human nature was too strong for him.

He realized now how large a part the desire to reduce Oakes's self-esteem had played with him. He further realized, looking at the thing honestly, that he had been firmly convinced that the young man would not come within a mile of a reasonable solution of the mystery. He had desired only that his failure would prove a valuable educational experience for him.

To Mr. Snyder's credit it must be said that the professional was mixed up with the unprofessional in his attitude toward his assistant. It was not only as a private individual that he had hoped to see Oakes reduced to humility by failure. He had also believed that failure at this particular point in his career would make Oakes a more valuable asset to the agency.

That Oakes had intelligence Mr. Snyder had never denied. His grievance against the lad was that he had only about *half* the intelligence with which he credited himself.

Oakes's aggressive belief in himself impaired his utility as a criminal investigator. He needed breaking in, and Mr. Snyder had hoped the Gunner case would achieve that end. But now here Oakes was, within a ridiculously short space of time, returning to the fold, not humble and defeated, but triumphant. Mr. Snyder looked forward with

apprenhension to the young man's probable demeanor under the intoxicating influence of victory.

His apprehensions were well grounded. He had barely finished the third of the series of cigars which, like milestones, marked the progress of his afternoon, when the door opened and young Mr. Oakes entered.

Mr. Snyder could not repress a faint moan at the sight of him. One glance was enough to tell him that his worst fears had been realized. Indeed, few people in the history of criminal investigation could have looked so pleased with themselves as Oakes did at that moment. He diffused self-satisfaction like a scent and in some mysterious way he seemed to have grown taller.

He was still tense, but his tenseness was now that of a proud warrior lion returning from some important kill, announcing his magnificence to the rest of the jungle with an impudent toss of his mane.

He sat down before Mr. Snyder had time to say a word, and the older man looked with dismay at this significant sign of his increased importance.

"I got your telegram," said Mr. Snyder.

Oakes nodded. "It surprised you, eh?" he asked.

Mr. Snyder resented the patronizing tone of the question, but he had resigned himself to be patronized, and keep his anger in check.

One of his chief virtues, which had compensated for him a certain lack of resourcefulness in his make-up, was his level-headedness and his ability to refuse to allow anything to disturb him seriously. His sense of humor had saved him in a hundred difficult situations, and it saved him now. He realized that Oakes could not help being patronizing at a moment such as this.

"Yes," he said. "It certainly did surprise me. I didn't suspect from your report that you'd even found a clue. Was it the East Indian possibility that gave you an opening wedge?"

Oakes laughed tolerantly. "Oh, I never really believed that preposterous theory for one moment. I just put it in to round out my report. I hadn't begun to think about the case then—not really think."

"No?" breathed Mr. Snyder, his anger rising suddenly and almost uncontrollably.

"No. I was just looking around it—giving it a trial spin."

"And having given it a trial spin—"

"Why, I rejected it out of hand, and promptly set about solving the case."

"You weren't long about it," Mr. Snyder said.

"The most puzzling mysteries can often be unraveled quite

rapidly, when once you know the pattern."

Mr. Snyder extended his cigar-case. "Suppose you trace the unraveling, step by step."

"Well, I won't say I haven't earned this," said Oakes, helping himself to an expensive Havana cigar. "Shall I begin at the beginning?"

"Why not? Unless you'd care to tell me first who did it! Was it one of the boarders?"

"No."

"Somebody from outside, then?"

Oakes smiled quietly. "Yes, you might call it somebody from outside. But I had better trace my reasoning from the start."

"On the theory, I suppose, that it spoils a story to know how it ends. Well—get to it!"

Oakes let the ash of his cigar fall delicately to the floor, another action which seemed significant to his employer. As a rule, his assistants, unless particularly pleased with themselves, used the ash-tray.

"My first act on arriving," he said, "was to have a talk with Mrs. Pickett. She's a very dull old woman."

"Curious. She struck me as rather intelligent."

"I can only repeat what I said about her in my report. She gave me no assistance whatever." Resentment brought a sudden flush to his face. Then his smile returned and he went on complacently: "I then examined the room where the death had taken place. It was exactly as you described it. There was no chimney, the door had been locked on the inside, and the one window was very high up. At first sight, it looked extremely unpromising.

"Next I had a talk with some of the other boarders. They had nothing of any importance to contribute. They talked mostly about themselves."

Oakes's self-assurance seemed actually to increase. "I then gave up trying to get help from outside, and resolved to rely on my own intelligence."

He smiled triumphantly. "It is a theory of mine, Mr. Snyder, which I have found valuable that, in nine cases out of ten, remarkable things don't happen."

"I don't quite get that," Mr. Snyder interrupted impatiently.

" I mean exactly what I say. I will put it another way if you like. What I mean is that the simplest explanation is nearly always the right one."

"I still don't see—"

"I have tested and proved it. Consider this case. Was there ever a case which was more entitled by rights to a bizarre solution? It was enough to make even the most hard-headed skeptic almost eager to believe in the supernatural. It seemed impossible that there should have been any reasonable explanation of the

man's death. Most men would have worn themselves out guessing at wild theories. If I had started to do that, I should have been guessing now.

"As it is—here I am. I trusted to my belief that nothing remarkable ever happens, and I was right."

Mr. Snyder sighed softly. Oakes was entitled to a certain amount of gloating, but there could be no doubt that his way of telling a story was downright infuriating.

"I believe in the logical sequence of events. I refuse to accept effects unless they are preceded by causes. In other words, with all due respect to your possibly contrary opinions, Mr. Snyder, I simply decline to believe in a murder unless there is a motive for it.

"The first thing I set myself to ascertain was—what was the motive for the murder of Captain Gunner? And, after thinking it over and making every possible inquiry, I decided that there was no murder. It was like an elementary sum in arithmetic."

Mr. Snyder's mouth opened, and he obviously was about to protest. But he appeared to think better of it and Oakes proceeded: "I then tested the suicide theory. What motive was there for suicide? There was no motive. Therefore, there was no suicide."

This time Mr. Snyder spoke. "You haven't been spending the last few days in the wrong house by any chance, have you? You will be telling me next that there wasn't any dead man."

Oakes smiled. "Not at all. Captain John Gunner was dead, all right. As the medical evidence proved, he died of the bite of a krait."

Mr. Snyder shrugged his shoulders. "Go on," he said. "It's your story. I'm listening."

"Well, I won't keep you long. Captain Gunner died from a snake-bite for the very excellent reason that he was bitten by a snake."

"Bitten by a snake?"

"By a krait. If you want me to be more specific—by a krait which came from Java."

Mr. Snyder's jaw fell open.

"How do you know?"

"I do know," said Oakes. "Beyond any possibility of doubt."

"Did you see the snake?"

Oakes shook his head.

"Then how in heaven's name—"

"I have enough evidence to make a jury convict John Q. Snake, Esq., without leaving the box."

"Then suppose you tell me this. How did your krait from Java get out of the room?"

"By the window," replied Oakes, impassively.

"How can you possibly explain that? You say yourself that the window was high up."

"Nevertheless, it got out by

the window. The logical sequence of events is proof enough that it was in the room. It killed Captain Gunner there, and *left traces of its presence outside.* Therefore, as the window was the only exit, it must have escaped by that route. It may have climbed or it may have jumped, but somehow it got out of that window."

"What do you mean—it left traces of its presence outside?"

"It killed a dog."

Mr. Snyder stared. "How—how could you have expected me to know that? You didn't mention it before."

"No," Oakes admitted, imperturbably.

"How do you *know* it killed the dog?" demanded Mr. Snyder.

"Because analysis proved that the animal had died from snakebite."

"Just where did this take place?"

"There is a sort of backyard behind the house," Oakes said. "The window of Captain Gunner's room projects out over it. It is full of boxes and litter and there are a few stunted shrubs scattered about. In fact, there is enough cover to hide any small object like the body of a dog. That's why it was not discovered at first.

"Katie, the maid who does most of the housework at the Reefton, discovered it the morning after I sent you my report while she was emptying a box of ashes in the yard. Nobody claimed the dog. It was just an ordinary stray dog without a collar or license. I don't suppose it belonged to anybody."

"It's a good thing you happened to think of having the analysis made."

"Not at all. It was the obvious thing to do. It constituted a coincidence, and I was on the lookout for that kind of coincidence. I needed to support my theory. Well, as I say, the analyst examined the body, and found that the dog had died of the bite of a krait."

"But you didn't find the snake?"

Oakes shook his head. "No. We cleaned out that yard until you could have eaten your breakfast there, but the snake had disappeared."

"Good Heavens! For all we know it may be wandering at large along the waterfront!"

"We'll hope it has been killed. It must have escaped through the door of the yard, which was standing ajar. That was a couple of days ago, and there has been no further tragedy. In all likelihood it is dead. The nights are pretty cold now, and it would probably have died of exposure."

"But, I just don't understand how a krait could have gotten to Long Island in the first place."

"There is a very simple ex-

planation for that. I told you it came from Java."

"How do you know it did? Be specific, can't you?"

"Captain Muller told me. Not directly but I pieced it together from what he said. It seems that Captain Gunner had an acquaintance, an old shipmate, living in Java. They corresponded, and occasionally this man would send the captain a present as a mark of his esteem. The last present he sent him was our friend, the krait."

"What? That's horrible. How could—"

"He didn't *know* he was sending it. He imagined he was shipping Gunner a crate of bananas, without any extras. Unfortunately the snake must have crept in unnoticed. These unsuspected additions to crates of bananas are quite common. You must have read about them in the papers. It was only the other day that a man found a tarantula inside one.

"Well, that's my case against John Q. Snake, and, short of catching him arching above his victim, I don't see how I could have made out a stronger one. Don't you agree with me?"

It went against the grain of Mr. Snyder to acknowledge defeat, but he was a fair-minded man, and he was forced to admit that Oakes did certainly seem to have solved the impossible.

"I congratulate you, son," he said as heartily as he could. "To be completely frank, when you started out I didn't think you could do it. It looked to me like one of those cases we keep discreetly quiet about when we are giving a prospective client a persuasive sales' talk."

"I simply refused to be led down blind alleys," Oakes said. "And you must admit, Mr. Snyder that I did very well without the amateur assistance of Mrs. Pickett, whom you seemed to admire."

Mr. Snyder looked embarrassed. "I was just pretending, son, so you'd meet the challenge head on. How did she take it? I guess she was pleased?"

"If she was, she didn't show it. I'm pretty well convinced she hasn't sense enough to be pleased at anything. However, she has invited me to have dinner with her tonight. I imagine she'll be as boring as usual, but she made such a point of it, I had to accept."

VI

For some time after Oakes had gone, Mr. Snyder sat smoking and thinking. His meditations were not altogether pleasant. Oakes, he felt, after this would be unbearable as a man, and what was worse from a professional point of view, of greatly diminished value to the agency.

To a temperament like Oakes,

easy success at such an early stage in his career would be disastrous. Oakes as a criminal investigator —and perhaps as a man as well —was still definitely in the school-boy stage, and what he needed most at the present point of his education was a failure which should keep his self-confidence in check. That he should have succeeded in solving his first really important case so swiftly was nothing less than a disaster.

To Mr. Snyder, immersed thus in embittered meditation, there was brought the card of a caller. Mrs. Pickett would be grateful if he could spare her a few moments.

Mr. Snyder was glad to see Mrs. Pickett. He was a student of character, and she had interested him at their first meeting. She fell into none of the facile categories into which he customarily divided men and women. There was something about her which had seemed to him unique, and he welcomed this second chance of studying her at close range.

She came in and sat down stiffly, balancing herself on the extreme edge of the chair in which a short while before young Mr. Oakes had lounged so luxuriously.

Her hands were folded on her lap, and her eyes had the penetrating stare which in the early periods of the investigation had so profoundly disconcerted Elliott Oakes. She gave Mr. Snyder, an expert in the difficult art of weighing people, an extraordinary impression of reserved force.

"How are you, Mrs. Pickett?" said Mr. Snyder genially. "I'm very glad that you could find time to pay me a visit. Well, so it wasn't murder, after all."

"Sir?"

"I've just been talking to Mr. Oakes, whom you met as Joseph Burton," said the detective. "He has told me all about it."

"He told *me* all about it," said Mrs. Pickett dryly.

Mr. Snyder looked at her inquiringly. Her manner seemed more suggestive than her words. A great deal more suggestive.

"A conceited, headstrong young fool," said Mrs. Pickett.

It was no new picture of his assistant that she had drawn. Mr. Snyder had often drawn it himself, but at the present juncture it surprised him. Oakes, in his hour of triumph, surely did not deserve this sweeping condemnation.

"Did not Mr. Oakes's solution of the mystery satisfy you, Mrs. Pickett?"

"No," she affirmed.

"It struck me as logical and convincing," Mr. Snyder said.

"You may call it all the fancy names you please, Mr. Snyder. But Mr. Oakes's solution was not the right one."

"Have you an alternative to offer?"

Mrs. Pickett tightened her lips.

"If you have, I should like to hear it."

"You will—at the proper time."

"What makes you so certain that Mr. Oakes is wrong?"

"He starts out with an explanation that isn't possible, and rests his whole case on it. There couldn't have been a snake in that room because it couldn't have gotten out. The window was too high."

"But surely the evidence of the dead dog?"

Mrs. Pickett looked at him as if he had disappointed her. "I had always heard *you* spoken of as a man with common sense, Mr. Snyder."

"I have always tried to use common sense."

"Then why are you trying now to make yourself believe that something happened which could not possibly have happened just because it fits in with something which isn't easy to explain?"

"You mean that there is another explanation of the dead dog?" Mr. Snyder asked.

"Not *another*. What Mr. Oakes takes for granted is not an explanation at all. But there is a common sense explanation, and if he had not been so headstrong and conceited he might have found it."

"You speak as if you had found it," chided Mr. Snyder.

"I have." Mrs. Pickett leaned forward as she spoke, and stared at him defiantly.

Mr. Snyder started. "*You* have!"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"You will know before tomorrow. In the meantime try and think it out for yourself. A successful and prosperous detective agency like yours, Mr. Snyder, ought to do something in return for a fee."

There was something in her manner so reminiscent of the school teacher reprimanding a recalcitrant pupil that Mr. Snyder's sense of humor came to his rescue.

"We do our best, Mrs. Pickett," he said. "But you mustn't forget that we are only human and cannot guarantee results. The public employs us at its own risk."

Mrs. Pickett did not pursue the subject. She waited grimly till he had finished speaking, and then proceeded to astonish Mr. Snyder still further by asking him to swear out a warrant for the arrest of a man known to them both on a charge of murder.

Mr. Snyder's breath was not often taken away in his own office. As a rule, he received his clients' communications calmly, strange as they often were. But

at her words he gasped. The thought crossed his mind that Mrs. Pickett might well be mentally unbalanced.

The details of the case were fresh in his memory, and he distinctly recollected that the person she mentioned had been away from the boarding-house on the night of Captain Gunner's death, and could, he imagined, produce witnesses to prove it.

Mrs. Pickett was regarding him with an unfaltering stare. To all outward appearances she was the opposite of unbalanced.

"But you can't swear out a warrant without evidence," he told her.

"I have evidence," she replied firmly.

"Precisely what kind of evidence?" he demanded.

"If I told you now you would think that I was out of my mind."

"But, Mrs. Pickett, do you realize what you are asking me to do? I cannot make this agency responsible for the arbitrary arrest of a man on the strength of a single individual's suspicions. It might ruin me. At the least it would make me a laughing-stock."

"Mr. Snyder, listen to me. You may use your own judgment whether or not to make the arrest on that warrant. You will listen to what I have to say, and you will see for yourself how the crime was committed. If after that you feel that you cannot make the arrest I will accept your decision."

Her voice rose and for the first time since they had met she abandoned the cold reserve which had previously masked her thoughts and emotions.

"I know who killed Captain Gunner," she said. "I knew it from the beginning, but I had no proof that a court would believe. Now I have such proof, and I can promise you that you will not be made a laughing-stock."

Against his judgment Mr. Snyder was impressed. This woman had the magnetism which makes for persuasiveness.

"It—it sounds incredible," he said.

Even as he spoke he remembered that it had long been a professional maxim of his that nothing was incredible, and he weakened still further.

"Mr. Snyder, I ask you to swear out that warrant."

The detective gave in. "Very well," he said.

Mrs. Pickett rose. "If you will come and dine at my house tonight I think I can prove to you that it will be needed. Will you come?"

"I'll come," promised Mr. Snyder.

VII

When Mr. Snyder arrived at the Reefton, and was shown into

the living room, he found Oakes already there.

It struck Oakes at once that his employer was preoccupied and nervous, and he would have inquired into Mr. Snyder's unusual frame of mind if at that moment the third guest of the evening had not unexpectedly arrived.

Mr. Snyder looked curiously at the newcomer. Captain Muller had a peculiar fascination for him, even though his long exercise of a profession which tended to rob its practitioners of sentiment made him hard-headed in his judgments. There was something macabre about the present circumstances which struck home to his imagination, for until now he had met his man in the open as an enemy, and it struck him as an unpleasant circumstance that he must now dine with a suspect whom it might be his unpleasant task to send to the electric chair.

He wished Mrs. Pickett could have arranged things otherwise. But she was his client, and when on duty in the interest of a client Mr. Snyder had rigorously schooled himself to repress his personal feelings.

Captain Muller was an interesting study to one in Mr. Snyder's peculiar position. It was not Mr. Snyder's habit to trust overmuch to appearances. But he could not help admitting that there was something about this man's aspect which brought Mrs. Pickett's charges out of the realm of the fantastic into that of the possible.

Here, to a student of criminals like Mr. Snyder, was obviously a man with something on his mind. That something need not necessarily be murder, or any crime whatsoever, the detective readily admitted. But under the circumstances the fact that Captain Muller was in a highly nervous condition was worthy of notice if nothing more.

There was something odd—an unnatural aspect of gloom—about the man. He bore himself like one carrying a heavy burden. His eyes were dull, his face haggard.

The next moment the detective was reproaching himself with allowing his imagination to run away with his calmer judgment. It mortified him to think that he was permitting himself to be carried away by a train of thought precisely as Oakes would have been. Nevertheless, whether it was a real oddness or whether Mrs. Pickett's words had overstimulated his imagination, there certainly did seem something strange about the captain.

Mr. Snyder disposed himself to watch events.

At this moment Oakes gave evidence that he, too, had been struck by the expression of Captain Muller's face.

"You're not looking well, Captain," he said.

Muller raised his heavy eyes. "I did not sleep well."

The door opened and Mrs. Pickett came in.

To Mr. Snyder one of the most remarkable points about a dinner, which for the rest of his life was to remain indelibly etched on his memory, was the peculiar metamorphosis of Mrs. Pickett from the brooding silent woman he had known to the gracious and considerate hostess.

Oakes appeared also to be overcome with surprise, so much so that he was unable to keep his astonishment to himself. He had come prepared to endure a dull evening absorbed in grim silence, and he found himself instead opposite a bottle of champagne of a brand and year which commanded his utmost respect. What was even more incredible his hostess had transformed herself into a pleasant old lady whose only aim seemed to be to make him feel at home.

Beside each of the guests' plates was a neat paper parcel. He picked his up, and stared at it in wonderment.

"Why, this is more than a party souvenir, Mrs. Pickett," he said. "It's the kind of mechanical marvel I've always wanted to have on my desk." It was a tiny model of a three-engined passenger plane, perfect in every detail.

"I'm glad you like it, Mr. Oakes," Mrs. Pickett said smiling. "You must not think of me simply as a tired old woman whom age has completely defeated. I am an ambitious hostess. When I give these little parties, I like to make them a success. I want each of you to remember this dinner.

"I'm sure I will."

Mrs. Pickett smiled again. "I think you all will. You, Mr. Snyder." She paused. "And you, Captain Muller."

To Mr. Snyder there was so much meaning in her voice as she said this that he was amazed that it conveyed no warning to Muller.

Captain Muller, however, was already drinking heavily. He looked up when addressed and uttered a sound which might have been taken for an expression of polite acquiescence. Then he filled his glass again.

Mr. Snyder, eying his hostess with a tense watchfulness which told him that his nerves were strung to their utmost, fancied that her eyes gleamed for an instant with a sinister light.

It faded next moment, as she turned to speak to Oakes, who was still staring at his souvenir with the restless curiosity of a boy.

Mr. Snyder's parcel revealed a watch-charm fashioned in the shape of a tiny, candid-eye camera.

"That," said Mrs. Pickett, "is

a compliment to your profession." She leaned toward the captain. "Mr. Snyder is a detective, Captain Muller."

He looked up.

It seemed to Mr. Snyder that a look of fear lit up his heavy eyes for an instant. It came and went, if indeed it came at all, so swiftly that he could not be certain.

"So?" said Captain Muller.

He spoke quite evenly, with just the amount of interest which such an announcement would naturally produce. But Mr. Snyder was conscious of a return of his old feeling of distrust for the man.

He had been fighting against this all evening, for he had a professional horror of approaching any case in a biased frame of mind. He was trying his hardest not to prejudge this suspect, but he found himself wavering.

"Now for yours, Captain," said Oakes. "I guess it's something special, It's twice the size of mine, anyway."

It may have been something in the old woman's expression as she watched Captain Muller slowly tearing the paper that sent a thrill of excitement through Mr. Snyder.

Something seemed to warn him of the approach of a psychological moment. He bent forward eagerly. Under the table his hands were clutching his knees in a bruising grip.

There was a strangled gasp, a clatter, and onto the table from the captain's hands there fell a little harmonica.

In the silence which followed all the suspicion which Mr. Snyder had been so sedulously keeping in check burst its bonds.

There was no mistaking the look on Muller's face now. His cheeks were like wax, and his eyes, so dull till then, blazed with a panic and horror which he could not repress. The glasses on the table rocked as he clutched at the cloth.

Mrs. Pickett spoke. "Why, Captain Muller, has it upset you? I thought that, as his best friend, the man who shared his room, you would value a memento of Captain Gunner. How fond you must have been of him for the sight of his harmonica to be such a shock."

The captain did not speak. He was staring fascinated at the thing on the table.

Mrs. Pickett turned to Mr. Snyder. Her eyes, as they met his, were the eyes of a fanatic. They held him entranced.

"Mr. Snyder, as a detective, you will be interested in a curious and very tragic affair which happened in this house a few days ago. One of my boarders, Captain Gunner, was found dead in his room. It was the room which he shared with Captain

Muller. I am very proud of the reputation of my house, Mr. Snyder, and it was a blow to me that this should have happened.

"I applied to an agency for a detective, and they sent me a stupid boy, with nothing to recommend him except his belief in himself. He said that Captain Gunner had died by accident, killed by a snake which had come out of a crate of bananas. I knew better. I knew that Captain Gunner had been murdered.

"Are you listening, Captain Muller? This will interest you, as you were such a friend of his."

The captain did not answer. He was staring straight before him, as if he saw something invisible in eyes forever closed in death.

"Yesterday we found the body of a dog. It had been killed, as Captain Gunner had been, by the poison of a snake.

"The boy from the detective agency said that this was conclusive. He said that the snake had escaped from the room after killing Captain Gunner and had in turn killed the dog. I knew that to be impossible, for, if there had been a snake in that room it could not have made its escape."

Her eyes flashed, and became remorselessly accusing.

"It was not a snake that killed Captain Gunner. It was a cat.

"Captain Gunner had a friend who hated him. One day, in opening a crate of bananas, this friend found a snake. He killed it, and extracted the poison. He knew Captain Gunner's habits. He knew that he played a harmonica.

"This man also had a cat. He knew that cats hated the sound of the harmonica. He had often seen this particular cat fly at Captain Gunner and scratch him when he played. He took the cat and covered its claws with the poison. And then he left it in the room with Captain Gunner. He knew what would happen."

Oakes and Mr. Snyder were on their feet. Captain Muller had not moved. He sat there, his fingers gripping the cloth.

Mrs. Pickett rose and went to a closet. She unlocked the door. "Kitty!" she called. "Kitty! Kitty!"

A black cat ran swiftly out into the room.

With a clatter of crockery and a ringing of glass the table heaved, rocked, and overturned as Muller staggered to his feet. He threw up his hands as if to ward something off. A choking cry came from his lips.

"Gott! Gott."

Mrs. Pickett's voice rang through the room, cold and biting: "Captain Muller, you murdered Captain Gunner!"

The captain shuddered. Then mechanically he replied: "Gott! Yes, I killed him."

"You heard, Mr. Snyder," said Mrs. Pickett. "He has confessed before witnesses. Take him away."

Muller allowed himself to be moved toward the door. His arm in Mr. Snyder's grip felt limp.

Mrs. Pickett stooped and took something from the debris on the floor. She rose, holding the harmonica.

"You are forgetting your souvenir, Captain Muller," she said.

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the poetical policeman

by . . . Edgar Wallace

Mr. Reeder was stiff, Victorian and somewhat apologetic. But when death pursued dark paths untrod he was a match for any criminal.

THE DAY Mr. Reeder arrived at the Public Prosecutor's office was indeed a day of tragedy for Mr. Lambton Green, branch manager of the London Scottish and Midland Bank.

That branch of the bank which Mr. Green controlled was situated at the corner of Pell Street and Firling Avenue on the "country side" of Ealing. It is a fairly large building and, unlike most suburban branch offices, the whole of the premises was devoted to banking business, for the bank carried very heavy deposits.

On Wednesday afternoons, in preparation for the pay days of three corporations with accounts of rather awesome dimensions, large sums in currency were brought from the head office and deposited in the steel and concrete strong-room, which was immediately beneath Mr. Green's private office, but admission to which was gained through a steel door in the general office. This door could be kept under surveillance from the street, and

To the variegated pattern of changing tastes and preferences which has marked the development of the detective story from Monsieur Dupin onward the work of Edgar Wallace has contributed a dramatic quality which a full generation has failed to dim. He was and still remains a perennial favorite of readers on both sides of the Atlantic, and his death a few years ago deprived mystery lovers of one of the ablest practitioners in the field. We're sure you'll like this gripping tale of suspense with a shock ending.

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to assist observation there was a shaded lamp fixed to the wall immediately above, which threw a powerful beam of light upon the door. Further security was insured by the employment of a night watchman, Arthur Malling, an army pensioner.

The bank lay on a restricted police beat which had been so arranged that the constable on patrol passed the bank every forty minutes. It was his practice to look through the window and exchange signals with the night watchman, his orders being to wait until Malling appeared.

On the night of October 17th Police-Constable Burnett stopped as usual before the wide peephole and glanced into the bank. The first thing he noticed was that the lamp above the strong-room door had been extinguished. The night watchman was not visible.

His suspicions aroused, the officer did not wait for the man to put in an appearance as he ordinarily would have done. Instead, he passed the window to the door, which, to his alarm, he found ajar. Pushing it open, he entered the bank, calling Malling by name. There was no answer.

Permeating the air was a faint, sweet scent. Unable to trace it to its source he passed quickly through the empty general office and entered the manager's room in which a light burned. Immediately he saw a figure stretched upon the ground. It was the night watchman. His wrists were handcuffed, and two straps had been tightly buckled about his knees and ankles.

The explanation for the strange and sickly aroma was clear. Above the head of the prostrate man was suspended, by a wire hooked to the picture-rail, an old tin can, the bottom of which was perforated so that there fell an incessant trickle of some volatile liquid upon the thick cotton pad which covered Malling's face.

Burnett, who had been wounded in the war, had instantly recognized the smell of chloroform. Dragging the unconscious man into the outer office, he snatched the pad from his face and sought vainly to bring him to consciousness. Then, realizing he could do nothing, he telephoned to the police station.

The police reserves arrived within a few minutes, and with them the divisional surgeon who had fortunately been at the station when the alarm came through. Every effort to restore Malling to life proved unavailing.

"He was probably dead when he was found," was the police doctor's verdict. "The significance of these scratches may be hard to determine."

As he spoke he pulled open the dead man's clenched fist, re-

vealing half a dozen little scratches on the inner surface of his right hand. They were recent, for there was a smear of blood on the palm.

Burnett was sent at once to arouse Mr. Green, the manager, who lived in Firling Avenue a short distance from the bank. It was a street of semi-detached villas of a pattern familiar enough to the Londoner, and as the officer walked through the little front garden to the door he saw a light through the panels. Hardly had he knocked before the door was opened and Mr. Lambton Green appeared, fully dressed and—to the officer's discerning eye—in a state of considerable agitation.

Constable Burnett saw on a hall chair a big bag, a traveling rug and an umbrella.

The little manager listened, pale as death, while Burnett told him of his discovery.

"The bank robbed? Impossible!" he almost shrieked. "My God! Our investments won't begin to secure the loss of such a sum!"

He was so near the point of collapse that Burnett had to assist him into the street.

"I—I was going away on a holiday," he said incoherently, as he walked up the dark thoroughfare toward the bank premises. "The fact is—I was leaving the bank. I left a note explaining to the directors just why I was tending my resignation."

Into a circle of suspicious men the manager tottered. He unlocked the drawer of his desk, stared and went a sickly shade of green.

"They're not here!" he said wildly. "I—I left my keys in this drawer—with the note!"

And then he crumpled to the floor in a dead faint. When the dazed man recovered he found himself in a police cell and, later in the day, standing handcuffed and despairing before a police magistrate, supported by two constables. He listened, like a man in a dream, to a charge of causing the death of Arthur Malling, and further, of converting to his own use the sum of one hundred thousand pounds.

It was on the morning of the first remand that Mr. John G. Reeder transferred himself with some reluctance—he was suspicious of all Government departments—from his own office on Lower Regent Street to a somewhat gloomy bureau on the top floor of the building which housed the Public Prosecutor. In making this change he advanced only one stipulation: that he should be connected by private telephone wire with his old bureau.

It was not, strictly speaking, a stipulation, for he never demanded anything. The plea was made nervously and apologetically. There was a certain wistful

helplessness about John G. Reeder which made people feel sorry for him, and caused even the Public Prosecutor a few uneasy moments of doubt as to whether he had been quite wise in substituting this weak-appearing man of middle age for Inspector Holford—bluff, capable, and heavily mysterious.

Mr. Reeder was fifty-two, a long-faced gentleman with sandy-gray hair and Victorian-period side whiskers that mercifully distracted attention from his large outstanding ears. He wore, halfway down his nose, a pair of silver-rimmed pince-nez, through which nobody had ever seen him look. Indeed, they were invariably removed when he was reading. A tight-fitting bowler hat matched and yet did not match a funeral-black suit tightly buttoned across his sparse chest. His boots were square-toed, his cravat—of the broad, chest-protector variety — was slightly frayed and tucked into place behind a wing-tipped collar.

The neatest appendage to Mr. Reeder was an umbrella rolled so tightly that it might be mistaken for a frivolous walking stick. Rain or shine, he carried this article hooked to his arm, and within living memory it had never been unfurled.

Inspector Holford—promoted now to the responsibilities of Superintendent—met him in the office to hand over his duties, and a more tangible quantity in the shape of old furniture and fixings.

"Glad to know you, Mr. Reeder," he said, extending his hand, and smiling cordially. "I haven't had the pleasure of meeting you before, but I've heard a great deal about you. You've been doing Bank of England work, haven't you?"

Mr. Reeder whispered that he had had that honor, and sighed as though he regretted the drastic sweep of fate that had torn him from the obscurity of his labors.

Mr. Holford's scrutiny was suddenly full of misgivings. "Well," he said awkwardly, "this job is different. But I'm told that you are one of the best informed men in London, and if such is the case your new task should not prove too difficult. Still, we've never had an outsider—I mean, so to speak, a private detective—in this office before. Naturally the Yard is a bit—"

"I quite understand," murmured Mr. Reeder, hanging up his immaculate umbrella. "Mr. Bolond quite naturally expected the appointment, and his wife is annoyed—furious, in fact. But she has no reason to be. Unfortunately, she is an ambitious woman. She has a third interest in a West End Dancing Club which is certain to be raided one of these days."

Holford was staggered. Here, from an unexpected quarter, was news that was little more than a whispered rumor at Scotland Yard.

"How the devil do you know that?" he stammered.

Mr. Reeder's smile was one of self-depreciation. "An observing man picks up odd scraps of information," he said apologetically. "I'm afraid I see wrong in everything. That is my curious perversion. I have a criminal mind!"

Holford drew a long breath. "Well—there is nothing much to wear on our nerves. That Ealing case is pretty clear. Green is an ex-convict who got a job at the bank during the war and worked up to manager. He has done seven years for conversion."

"Embezzlement and conversion," murmured Mr. Reeder. "Dear me. I'm afraid I was the principal witness against him. You see, Inspector, bank crimes are rather a hobby of mine. Yes, he got into difficulties with money-lenders. It was very foolish of him—extremely foolish. And he doesn't admit his latest error." Mr. Reeder sighed heavily. "Poor fellow! With his life at stake one may forgive and indeed condone his pitiful prevarications."

The inspector stared at the new man in amazement. "I can't see that Green deserves any sympathy," he said. "The scoundrel has cached one hundred thousand pounds and told the weakest yarn I've ever heard. You'll find copies of the police reports here, if you'd like to read them. The scratches on Malling's hand are curious. Did you know they've found several on the other hand. They are not deep enough to suggest a struggle. As to the yarn that Green tells—"

Mr. J. G. Reeder nodded sadly. "It was not an ingenious story," he said, almost with regret. "If I remember correctly it ran something like this. He had been recognized by an ex-convict who served in Dartmoor with him, and this conniving fellow wrote a blackmailing letter demanding that he pay handsomely or clear out.

"Refusing to return to a life of crime, Green wrote out a full confession, and put it in an envelope addressed to his directors. The envelope he placed in the upper right hand drawer of his desk, along with his keys. He also left a note for his head cashier on the desk itself, intending to leave London and try to make a fresh start where he was unknown."

"There were no letters in or on the desk," said the inspector decisively. "And no keys. The only true part of the yarn was that he had done time."

"Been imprisoned," suggested Mr. Reeder plaintively. He had a horror of slang in police-topic

conversation, polite or otherwise. "Yes, that was true," he conceded.

Left alone in his office, Mr. Reeder busied himself for a very considerable time at his private telephone, communing with the young person who was still a young person, although the passage of time had dealt unkindly with her. For the rest of the morning he was reading the depositions which his predecessor had put on the desk.

It was late in the afternoon when the Public Prosecutor strolled into his room and glanced at the huge pile of manuscripts through which his subordinate was wading.

"What in heaven's name are you reading?" he asked, with a note of satisfaction in his voice. "The Green business? Surely you must realize by now that it's a fairly straightforward case. I have had a letter from the president of the man's bank, who for some reason seems to think Green was telling the truth."

Mr. Reeder looked up with the pained expression which he invariably wore when he was puzzled. "Here is the evidence of Policeman Burnett," he said. "Perhaps you can enlighten me, sir. Policeman Burnett stated in his evidence—No, wait, hold on. I'd better read it:

"Some time before I reached the bank premises I saw a man standing at the corner of the street, immediately outside the bank. I saw him distinctly in the light of a passing mail van. I did not attach any importance to his presence, and I did not see him again. It was possible for this man to have gone round the block and come to 120 Firling Avenue without being seen by me. Immediately after I saw him, my foot struck against a piece of iron on the sidewalk. I put my lamp on the object and found it was an old horseshoe; I had seen children playing with this particular shoe earlier in the evening. When I looked again towards the corner, the man had disappeared. He would have seen the light of my lamp. I saw no other person, and so far as I can remember, there was no light showing in Green's house when I passed it."

Mr. Reeder looked up.

"Well?" said the Prosecutor. "There's nothing remarkable about that. It was probably Green, who dodged round the block and came in at the back of the constable."

Mr. Reeder scratched his chin.

"Yes," he said thoughtfully. "Yes, of course." He shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "Would it be considered indecorous if I made a few inquiries, independent of the police?" he asked nervously. "I should not like them to think that a mere dilettante was interfering with their lawful functions."

"By all means," said the Prosecutor heartily. "Go down and see the officer in charge of the case. I'll give you a note to him. It is by no means unusual for my officer to conduct a separate investigation, though I am afraid you will discover very little. The ground has been well covered by Scotland Yard."

"It would be permissible to see Green?" hesitated Reeder.

"Green? Why of course! I will send you up the necessary order."

The light was fading from a gray, blustering sky, and rain was falling fitfully when Mr. Reeder, with his furled umbrella hooked to his arm, and with his coat collar turned up, stepped through the dark gateway of Brixton Prison and was led to the cell where a haggard-eyed, distracted man sat gazing into vacancy.

Reeder, with his extraordinary memory for faces, recognized him instantly, but there was a long moment of hesitation on the other's part before the recognition was mutual.

Green's voice, when at last he spoke, hardly rose above a whisper.

"Yes, Mr. Reeder, I remember you now. You were the gentleman who caught me before. But I've been as straight as a die ever since. I've never taken a farthing that didn't belong to me. I—I don't know what my poor girl will think—"

"Are you married?" asked Mr. Reeder sympathetically.

"No, but I was going to be—rather late in life. She's nearly thirty years younger than I am, and the best girl that ever—"

Reeder listened to the rhapsody that followed, the melancholy deepening in his face.

"She hasn't been into the court, thank God, but she knows the truth. A friend of mine told me that she has been absolutely knocked out."

"I'm genuinely sorry, believe me." Mr. Reeder shook his head.

"It happened on her birthday, too," Green went on bitterly.

"Did she know you were going away?"

"Yes, I told her the night before. I'm not going to bring her into the case. If we'd been properly engaged it would be different. But there was no possibility of that because she's married. She's divorcing her husband, but the decree hasn't been made absolute yet. That's why I never went about with her or saw much of her. And of course, nobody knew about our engagement, even though we lived on the same street."

"Firling Avenue?" asked Reeder, and the bank manager nodded despondently.

"She was married when she was seventeen to a brute. It was pretty galling for me, having to keep quiet about it—I mean, for nobody to know about our en-

gagement. It might give other men completely wrong ideas about her. Why, that fool Burnett, who arrested me, was sweet on her. He used to write her poetry. You wouldn't think it possible in a policeman, could you?"

The outrageous incongruity of a poetical policeman did not seem to shock Mr. Reeder.

"There is poetry in every soul, Mr. Green," he said gently, "and a policeman is a man."

Though Mr. Reeder could dismiss such eccentricity lightly, the poetical policeman filled his mind all the way home to his house in the Brockley Road, and occupied his thoughts for the rest of that day, and a good part of the night.

It was a quarter to eight the next morning, and the world seemed entirely populated by milkmen and whistling newsboys when a greatly refreshed Mr. J. G. Reeder came into Firling Avenue.

He stopped for a moment outside the bank, which had long since ceased to be an object of local awe and fearfulness, and then pursued his way down the broad avenue. On either side of the thoroughfare ran a row of attractive villas—attractive even though they bore a strong family resemblance to one another.

Each house with its little forecourt was sometimes laid out simply as a grass plot, and sometimes decorated with beds of flowers. Green's house was the eighteenth in the road on the right-hand side. Here he had lived with an elderly housekeeper, and apparently gardening was not his hobby, for the court in front was covered with grass that had been allowed to grow at its will.

Before the twenty-sixth house in the road, Mr. Reeder paused and gazed with mild interest at the blue blinds which covered every window. Evidently Miss Magda Grayne was a lover of flowers, for geraniums filled the window-boxes and were set at intervals along the tiny border under the bow window. In the center of the grass plot was a circular flower-bed with one flowerless rose tree, the leaves of which were drooping and brown.

As he raised his eyes to the upper window, the blind went up slowly, and he was dimly conscious that there was a figure behind the white lace curtains. Mr. Reeder walked hurriedly away, as one caught in an immodest act, and resumed his peregrinations until he came to the big nursery garden which formed the corner lot at the far end of the road.

Here he stood for some time in contemplation, his arm resting on the iron railings, his eyes staring blankly at the vista of greenhouses. He remained in

this attitude so long a time that one of the nurserymen, not unnaturally thinking that a stranger was seeking admission to the gardens, came over with the laborious gait of the man who wrests his living from the soil, and asked if he was looking for anybody.

"Several people," sighed Mr. Reeder. "Several people!"

Leaving the resentful man to puzzle out the implications of that evasive statement, he slowly retraced his steps. At one of the cottages he stopped again, opened the little iron gate and passed up the path to the front door. A small girl answered his knock and ushered him into the parlor.

The room was not well furnished. In fact, it was scarcely furnished at all. A strip of almost new linoleum covered the passage and the furniture of the parlor itself was made up of wicker chairs, a square of art carpet and a table. He heard the sound of feet above his head, feet on bare boards, and then presently the door opened and a young lady came in.

She was not unattractive, but her face was pale and haggard, and her eyes looked as though she had been recently weeping.

"Miss Magda Grayne?" he asked, staring steadily at her.

She nodded, her features tightening in alarm.

"Are you from the police?" she asked.

"Not exactly the police." He chose his words with care. "I hold an appointment in the office of the Public Prosecutor, which is analogous to, but distinct from, a position in the Metropolitan Police Force."

Her expression did not change.

"I wondered if anybody would come to see me," she said. "Did Mr. Green send you?"

"Mr. Green told me of your existence," he said, reassuringly. "He did not send me."

There came to her face for the barest instant a look which almost startled him. The expression dawned and passed so quickly he had no time to analyze it.

"I was expecting somebody to come," she said. "What made him do it?"

"You think he is guilty?" Mr. Reeder asked gently.

"The police think so." She drew a long sigh. "I wish to God I had never seen this place!"

He did not answer. His eyes were roving round the apartment. On a bamboo table was an old vase which had been clumsily filled with golden chrysanthemums, of a peculiarly beautiful variety. Amidst them flowered a large Michaelmas daisy that had the forlorn appearance of a parvenu that had strayed by mistake into noble company.

"You're fond of flowers?" he murmured.

She glanced at the vase indifferently.

"Yes, I like flowers," she said. "The girl arranged them." Her eyes returned to his face. "Do you think they will hang him?" she asked.

The brutality of the question, put without hesitation, pained Reeder. "It is a very serious charge," he said. "Have you by any chance a photograph of Mr. Green?"

She frowned. "Yes, I have quite a large one, taken last winter. Do you want it?"

Mr. Reeder nodded.

She had hardly left the room before he was at the bamboo table and had lifted out the flowers. As he had seen through the glass, they were roughly tied with a piece of string. He examined the ends, and here again his first observation had been correct. None of the flowers had been cut. They had been plucked bodily from their stalks. Beneath the string was the paper which had been first wrapped about the stalks. It was a page torn from a notebook. He could see the red lines, but the pencilled writing was indecipherable.

As her footsteps sounded on the stairs, he quickly replaced the flowers in the vase, and when she came in he was staring through the window into the street.

"Thank you," he said, taking the photograph from her. It bore an affectionate inscription on the back.

Mr. Reeder frowned. "You're married, he tells me, madam?"

"Yes, I am married," she said, shortly. "But I am getting a divorce."

"Have you been living here long?"

"About three months," she replied. "It was his wish that I should live here."

He looked at the photograph again. "Do you know Constable Burnett?" he asked.

Her lips tightened, and an angry flush came to her face.

"Yes, I know the sloppy fool!" she said viciously. And then, realizing that she had been surprised into an expression which was not altogether ladylike, she went on in a softer tone. "Mr. Burnett is rather sentimental, and I don't like sentimental people, especially—well, you understand, Mr.—"

"Reeder," murmured that gentleman.

"You understand, Mr. Reeder, that when a girl is engaged and in my position, there are some kind of attentions that are not very welcome."

Reeder was looking at her keenly. Of her sorrow and distress there could be no doubt. In the categorically significant province of the human emotions, and the ravages they make upon the human countenance, Mr.

Reeder was almost as great an authority as Mantegazza.

"Mr. Green, I see, gave you this photograph on your birthday," he said, staring at the inscription. "You were born on the seventeenth of October. You are English, of course?"

"Yes, I'm English," she said shortly. "I was born in Walworth—in Wallington. I once lived in Walworth."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-three," she replied.

Mr. Reeder took off his glasses and polished them on a large silk handkerchief.

"The whole tragic affair is inexpressibly sad," he said. "I am glad to have had the opportunity of speaking with you, young lady. I can sympathize with you very deeply."

Thus unsatisfactorily he concluded his business of the morning, and took his departure.

Miss Grayne closed the door on him, saw him stop in the middle of the path to pick up something from a border-bed, and wondered, frowning, what possible interest he could have in the horseshoe she had thrown through the window the night before.

Into Mr. Reeder's tail pocket went the piece of rusted steel and then he continued his thoughtful way to the police station, for he had a few questions to ask.

The men of Section 10 were parading for duty when Mr. Reeder came timidly into the charge room and showed his credentials to the inspector in charge.

"Oh, yes, Mr. Reeder," said that officer affably. "We have had a note from the P. P.'s office, and I think I had the pleasure of working with you on a rather important case a few years ago. Now what can I do for you? . . . Burnett? Yes, he's here."

He called the man's name and a young and good-looking officer stepped from the ranks.

"He's the man who discovered the murder—he's marked for promotion," said the inspector. "Burnett, this gentleman is from the Public Prosecutor's office and he wants to have a little talk with you. You may use my office if you wish, Mr. Reeder."

The young policeman saluted and followed the shuffling figure into the privacy of the inspector's office. He was a confident young man. Not only had his name and portrait appeared in the newspapers. The hint of promotion had become almost an accomplished fact, and before his eyes was the prospect of a supreme achievement.

"They tell me that you are something of a poet, officer," said Mr. Reeder."

Burnett blushed. "Why, yes, sir. I write a bit," he confessed.

"Love poems, Mr. Burnett?" asked the other gently. "One

finds time in the night for such fancies, and there is no inspiration quite equal to that of love, is there, Mr. Burnett?"

Burnett's face was crimson. "I've done a bit of writing in the night, sir," he admitted. "But I give you my word I've never neglected my duty."

"Naturally," murmured Mr. Reeder. "You have a poetical mind. It was a poetical impulse which led you to pluck flowers in the middle of the night—"

"The nurseryman told me I could take any flowers I wanted," Burnett interrupted hastily. "I did nothing wrong."

Reeder inclined his head in agreement.

"That I know. You picked the flowers in the dark—did you know, by the way, that you inadvertently included a Michaelmas daisy with your chrysanthemums?—tied up your little poem to them, and left them on Miss Grayne's doorstep with—er—a horseshoe. I wondered what had become of that horseshoe."

"I threw them up on to her —to the lady's window-sill," corrected the uncomfortable young man. "As a matter of fact, the idea didn't occur to me until I had passed the house."

Mr. Reeder's face was thrust forward. "This is what I want to confirm," he said softly. "The idea of leaving the flowers did not occur to you until you had passed Miss Grayne's house? The horseshoe suggested the thought?" Mr. Reeder paused, then went on quickly, "Then you went back, picked the flowers, tied them up with the little poem you had already written, and tossed them up to her window."

Constable Burnett's face was crimson. "I don't know how you guessed that, but it is a fact, sir. If I've done anything wrong—"

"It is never wrong to be in love," said Mr. J. G. Reeder soberly. "Love is a very beautiful experience. I have frequently read about it."

Miss Magda Grayne had dressed to go out for the afternoon and was putting on her hat, when she saw the disconcertingly talkative, middle-aged man who had called so early that morning walking up the tessellated path. Behind him she recognized a detective engaged in the case. The servant was out, which fortunately meant that nobody could be admitted except by herself.

She walked quickly behind the dressing-table into the bay of the window and glanced up and down the road. Yes, there was the cab which usually accompanied such visitations, and, standing, by the driver, another man, obviously a detective.

She pulled up the overlay of her bed, took out the flat pad of bank-notes that she had concealed there, and thrust them into her handbag. Then, stepping on

tiptoe, she crossed the landing, passed into the unfurnished back room, opened the window, and dropped to the flat roof of the kitchen.

In another minute she was in the garden and through the back gate. A narrow passage divided the two lines of villas that ran parallel to one another for the full length of the thoroughfare. She was in High Street and had boarded a car before Mr. Reeder grew tired of knocking. To the best of his knowledge he never saw her again.

At the Public Prosecutor's request, Mr. Reeder called at his chief's house after dinner and told his surprising story.

"Green, who had the unusual experience of being promoted to his position over the heads of his seniors because of his war record was undoubtedly an ex-convict," Mr. Reeder said. "He spoke the absolute truth when he said that he had received a letter from a man who had served a period of imprisonment with him. The name of the blackmailer is—or rather was — Arthur George Crater, whose other name was Malling!"

"Not the night watchman?" exclaimed the Public Prosecutor, in amazement.

Mr. Reeder nodded. "Yes, sir, it was Arthur Malling. His daughter, Miss Magda Crater, was born at Walworth on the Seventeenth of October, Nineteen hundred. When I questioned her she said Walworth first, but quickly corrected herself, changing it to Wallington. When people adopt false family names, they seldom change their given names, and the 'Magda' was easy to identify.

"Evidently Malling had planned this robbery of the bank very carefully. He had brought his daughter, under a false name, to Ealing, and had managed to get her introduced to Mr. Green. Magda's job was to worm her way into Green's confidence and learn all that she could.

"Possibly it was part of her duty to secure casts of the keys. Whether Malling recognized in the manager an old prison acquaintance, or whether he obtained the facts from the girl, we shall never know. But when the information came to him, he saw, in all probability, an opportunity of robbing the bank and of throwing suspicion upon the manager.

"The girl's role was that of a woman who was to be divorced, and I must confess this puzzled me until I realized that in no circumstances would Malling wish his daughter's name to be associated with the bank manager.

"The night of the seventeenth was chosen for the raid. Malling's plan to get rid of the manager had succeeded. He saw the

letter on the table in Green's private office, read it, secured the keys—although he had in all likelihood a duplicate set—and at a favorable moment cleared as much portable money from the bank vaults as he could carry, and hurried them around to the house in Firling Avenue, where they were buried in the central bed of the front garden under a rose bush.

"I rather imagined there was something interfering with the nutrition of that unfortunate bush the first time I saw it. I can only hope that the tree is not altogether dead, and I have given instructions that it shall be replanted and well fertilized."

"Yes, yes," said the Prosecutor, who was not at all interested in horticulture.

"In planting the tree, as he did in some haste, Malling scratched his hand. Roses have thorns. I went to Ealing to find the rose bush that had scratched his hand. Hurrying back to the bank, he waited, knowing that Constable Burnett was due at a certain time. He had prepared the can of chloroform, the handcuffs and straps were waiting for him, and he stood at the corner of the street until he saw the flash of Burnett's lamp. Then, running into the bank and leaving the door ajar, he strapped himself, fastened the handcuffs and lay down, expecting that the policeman would arrive, and find the open door and rescue him.

"But Constable Burnett had had some pleasant exchanges with the daughter. Doubtless she had received instructions from her father to be as pleasant to him as possible. Burnett was a poetical young man. He knew it was her birthday, and as he walked along the street his foot struck an old horseshoe. Immediately the idea occurred to him that he should return, attach the horseshoe to some flowers, which the nurseryman had given him permission to pick, and leave his little bouquet, so to speak, at his lady's feet. A poetical idea, surely, and one worthy of the finest traditions of the Metropolitan Police Force. This he did, but it took some time. And while the young man was philandering Arthur Crater was dying!

"In a few seconds after lying down he must have lost consciousness. The chloroform still dripped, and when the policeman eventually reached the bank, ten minutes late, Malling was dead!"

The Prosecutor frowned.

"How on earth did you piece together all this?" he asked.

Mr. Reeder shook his head sadly. "I have that innate perversity," he said. "It is a terrible misfortune, but it is true. I see evil in everything—in dying rose bushes, in horseshoes, in poetry even. I have the mind of a criminal. It is deplorable!"

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poison trail

by . . . Herbert Harris

Commissioner Ganley liked to sit back, and run a slide rule over his writer guests. Just for a lark —he stood murder on its head.

A DETECTIVE STORY writer who is tired of run-of-the-morgue whodunits, can hardly do better than listen to ex-Police Commissioner William Ganley. So I was glad to find him talkative when I parked myself next to him at the club.

"You going to pick my brains again?" he said, smiling as if he had bitten into a lemon.

Still, it was something to get a smile from the ex-Commissioner who had solved a thousand riddles. Normally the eyes under those ramparts of eyebrows remained inscrutable and forbidding.

"See there's another poisoned chocolates case," he said, and tapped the evening paper. "Reminds me of the Lucy Coleford case. Remember that?"

"Yes, indeed," I said, hoping to please him.

"Liar," Ganley said. "There was never any Lucy Coleford. I picked the first name that came into my head. Still, let's call her Lucy Coleford, shall we?"

He paused, as if he were mak-

Deceptively ingenuous as this story may seem in its manner of unfolding we're prepared to go on record as dubbing it sparklingly brilliant, if not indeed unique. For Herbert Harris has introduced us here to a wholly novel arrangement in clues and counter-clues, culminating in a topsy-turvy denouement that would have left the sage of Baker Street in a blue funk.

ing the story up, and for all I knew he was.

"Of course," Ganley went on, "when it was reported that somebody had tried to poison her, nobody was terribly surprised. She was the sort of woman who went through life demanding to see the manager. Not an old woman. Let us say she was middle-ageless. Quite a good looker."

He seemed pleased by his own adroit powers of description.

"But there was one person," he continued, "who couldn't possibly be guilty of trying to poison her. That was her personal maid, Elsie. You see, the poisoned chocolates sent to Mrs. Coleford were sampled by Elsie first. Poor girl was found as stiff as a poker. That was one potential suspect eliminated, anyway.

"We thought it would be a good idea to trace where the chocolates were bought. But when we actually managed to do so the confectioner said: 'No good coming to *me,* mate. I've only just taken the shop over from Dad. And Dad can't tell you anything. He's dead.' Which was a bit of bad luck. The lamented confectioner might have given us a description of the person who bought the chocolates.

"Now, all this took place while her husband—let's call him Bertram Coleford—was on a business trip to Puerto Rico. He had been gone some time, so he, at least, had an armor-plated alibi.

"The favorite starter in the guilty-party stakes was young Nicholas, Mrs. Coleford's nephew, who stood to benefit under her will. But the evidence against him was too good to be true. You see, the chocolates had been addressed to Mrs. Coleford with a touching and affectionate little note signed, 'Nicky.'

"Nicholas had recently sailed into adventure on a banana-boat, and had apparently sent his aunt a parting gift. 'He knows I'm passionately fond of chocolates,' Lucy Coleford said. 'Luckily I was dieting and leaving chocolates alone. But the idea of Nickey wanting to poison me . . .'

"Of course, nobody with a shred of common sense—even with a legacy looming on the horizon—would send his aunt poisoned chocolates accompanied by a note signed by himself. Somebody, it seemed, was rather clumsily trying to put a rope around Nicholas's neck. But who?

"Who, we asked ourselves, would have a really sound reason for trying to murder Lucy Coleford? She was a woman who swept through life voice first, and she had the very iceberg of a tongue. But homicide doesn't spring from ordinary dislike—except perhaps in the marital state, and, of course, Bertram Coleford was not a suspect. Nobody existed, as far as we could tell, who

would want to send Mrs. Coleford to join her ancestors.

"When a handwriting expert told us quite definitely that the note accompanying the chocolates had *not* been written by Nicholas, that the thing was a forgery, it was obvious we had to look elsewhere.

"I asked myself if the poisoned chocolates were really intended for Mrs. Coleford? Let us suppose, I said, that the chocolates were actually intended for the person who habitually dipped into Mrs. Coleford's confectionery? In short—for the maid Elsie.

"Which immediately posed another question. Who would want to kill Elsie?"

I waited while the ex-Commissioner marshalled his thoughts for a dramatic curtain.

"There was always the possibility," he proceeded finally, "that during Bertram Coleford's absence in Puerto Rico, Lucy had been indulging in a clandestine affair, and you could go on to surmise that the maid Elsie had full knowledge of her indiscretion and had begun to mention the price of her silence. From that you might further deduce that Mrs. Coleford had, in fact, poisoned the maid.

"Which, of course," concluded the ex-Commissioner, "proved to be the case. And now, having winkled another story out of me, you can buy me a double Scotch."

A child is kidnapped and a tiny dog—the eeriest dog in all the world—confronts the famed M. Poirot with a terrifying crime enigma

THE KIDNAPPING OF JOHNNY WAVERLY

By AGATHA CHRISTIE

A renowned mystery story writer's best-loved sleuth bribes a man to tell the truth—in a front-page murder case with a tumultuous climax

NO MOTIVE FOR MURDER

by CRAIG RICE

the smell of dead men

by . . . Sax Rohmer

Had some fiendishly clever thief robbed the museum and slain the night watchman? Or did Moris Klaw confront a darker mystery?

WHEN DID Moris Klaw first appear in London?

It is a question which I am often asked and I try to answer it as simply and directly as possible. I invariably tell the curious that to the best of my knowledge it was shortly before the commencement of the strange happenings at the Menzies Museum.

It was my friendship with Martin Coram which led to my first meeting with Moris Klaw. I had known Coram for a number of years, and it was after his appointment to the curatorship of the Menzies Museum that a singular occurrence took place there. It took place on a very warm night in August and it was brought to my attention by Coram himself on the following morning, at an hour when my privacy is seldom interrupted.

I had just seated myself at the breakfast table when he walked in unexpectedly and sank into an armchair. His lean, sharp-featured face looked more gaunt than usual, and his hand shook

At the demise of Sherlock Holmes—a heretical statement, we fear, to those who insist he is still alive—an uniquely bold and flavorful aspect of characterization vanished from the detective story. A good many modern sleuths, despite their subtlety and undoubted gusto, seem but a shadow and a voice by comparison. But all is not lost, for the ingenious creator of Dr. Fu Manchu here introduces us to another gentleman who may be said to possess distinctly Baker Street qualities. He will appear again in our pages.

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nervously as he accepted the cigarette which I offered him.

"There's trouble at the museum!" he said abruptly. "We're going to need your help, Searles."

I looked at him for a moment without replying. I was well aware of the responsibility of his position, and I feared that he referred to a theft from the collection.

"Something gone?" I asked.

"No—worse!" was his reply. "I could almost wish it had been a theft."

"What do you mean, Coram?"

He threw the cigarette, unlighted, into the fireplace. "You know Conway?" he said: "Conway, the night attendant. Well—he's dead!"

I got abruptly to my feet, my breakfast forgotten. I stared at him incredulously. "Do you mean that he died in the night?" I inquired.

Coram nodded, standing motionless by the fireplace in a kind of strained expectancy.

"Are you trying to say that he was murdered?"

"Without a doubt, Searles. He's had his neck broken!" said Coram.

I waited for no further explanations, but, hastily dressing, accompanied Coram to the museum. It consists of four long, rectangular rooms. The windows of two overlook South Grafton Square, another the court that leads to the curator's private entrance and the last adjoins an enclosed garden attached to the building.

This fourth room is on the ground floor, and can only be entered through the hall from the square. The other three—containing the principal and more valuable exhibits—are upon the first floor and are reached by a flight of stairs from the hall.

The remainder of the building is occupied by an office and the curator's private apartments. It is completely shut off from that portion which is open to the public, its only communication being an iron door which is kept locked during visiting hours.

The room described in the catalogue as the "Greek Room" proved to be the scene of the tragedy. It is one of the two overlooking the square, and contains some of the finest art treasures in the collection.

The museum is not open to the public until ten o'clock, and I found upon my arrival that the only occupants of the Greek Room were the custodian on duty, two constables, a plain-clothes officer, and an inspector—that is, if you exclude as an occupant the body of poor Conway.

He had not been touched, but lay as he had been found by Beale, the custodian who was in charge of the upper rooms during the day. It was easy to see

that he was beyond medical aid. In fact, the position of his body was so extraordinary as almost to defy description.

There are three windows in the Greek Room, with wall-cases between, and in the gap corresponding to the east window and just by the door opening into the next exhibition hall is a chair for the attendant.

Conway lay face down on the polished floor with his limbs partly under this chair, and his clenched fists thrust straight out before him. His head, turned partially to one side, was doubled underneath his chest in a most dreadful manner, indisputably pointing to a broken neck, and his custodian's cap lay some distance away, under a table supporting a heavy case of vases.

So much I could see at a glance as I stood between Coram and the two constables.

"What do you make of it?" Coram asked.

I shook my head in stunned horror. I could hardly grasp the reality of the tragedy. Indeed, I was still staring at the huddled figure when the doctor arrived.

At his request we laid the dead man flat upon the floor, to facilitate the examination. The instant we did so we saw that he was greatly cut and bruised about the head and face, and that his features were distorted in a most extraordinary manner. It was almost as though he had been suffocated.

The doctor did not fail to give that unusual post-mortem appearance the most intense scrutiny. "He put up a desperate struggle," he said. "He must have been in the last stages of exhaustion when his neck was broken."

"My dear fellow!" cried Coram, somewhat irritably, "what do you mean when you say that he put up a struggle? There could not possibly have been any one else in these rooms last night!"

"Excuse me, sir," said the inspector, "but there certainly was something going on here. Have you seen the glass case in the next room?"

"Glass case?" muttered Coram, running his hand distractedly through his thick black hair. "No, naturally I haven't seen it. Just what—"

"In here, sir," said the inspector, leading the way into the adjoining apartment.

At his words we all followed, and found that he referred to the glass front of a wall-case containing statuettes and images of Egyptian deities. The center pane of this was smashed into fragments, and the broken glass strewed the floor and the shelves inside the case.

"That certainly looks like a struggle, sir, doesn't it?" said the inspector.

"What in heaven's name does

it mean?" groaned Coram. "Who could possibly have gained access to the building in the night? And even if someone did, how could he have quitted it again when all the doors remained locked?"

"That is what we must do our best to discover," replied the inspector. "Meanwhile here are his keys. They were lying on the floor in a corner of the Greek Room."

Coram took them, mechanically. "Beale," he said to the custodian, "see if any of the cases are unlocked."

The man nodded, and started to go around the rooms, inspecting each exhibit carefully. He had proceeded no further than the Greek Room when he made a significant discovery. "The top of this case is unfastened, sir!" he cried.

We hurriedly joined him, to find that he stood before a marble pedestal surmounted by a thick glass case containing what Coram had frequently assured me was the gem of the collection—the Athenean harp.

His comments came back to me.

It was thought to be of very ancient Greek workmanship, and was constructed of fine gold, inlaid with jewels. It represented two reclining female figures with their arms interlocked above their heads, their hands meeting. I noticed that several of the strings—the ones which were still intact—were of incredibly fine gold wire.

It was definitely not of the archaic or pre-classical period, but it was said to resemble other musical instruments associated with the worship of Pallas in an extremely remote age, and at the time it was brought to light much controversy had been waged concerning its claims to authenticity. Several connoisseurs proclaimed it to be the work of a famous goldsmith of medieval Florence, and nothing but a clever forgery.

However, Greek or Florentine, amazingly ancient or comparatively modern, it was a beautiful piece of workmanship and of very great intrinsic value, apart from its artistic worth and unique character.

"I thought so!" said the plain-clothes man. "Conway must have surprised a clever museum thief bending over this case, and grappled with him."

Coram sighed wearily. "My good fellow," he said, "can you explain by any logical reasoning how a man could get into these apartments and leave them again during the night?"

"In respect to that, sir," said the detective, "there are a few questions I should like to ask you. In the first place, at what time does the museum close?"

"At six o'clock in the summer," Coram replied, frowning.

"What do you do when the last visitor has gone?"

"Beale locks the outside door, and then thoroughly examines every room to make certain that no one remains concealed. He next locks the communicating doors, comes down into the hall, and turns the keys over to me. I gave them into Conway's keeping last evening when he came on at half past six. Every hour thereafter it is the night attendant's duty to go through the museum, relocking all the doors behind him."

"I understand that there is a tell-tale watch in each room?"

"Yes. That in the Greek Room registers four a. m., so that it must have been about then that Conway met his death. He had evidently opened the door communicating with the next room—the room containing the broken glass case. But he did not touch the detector, and the door was found open this morning."

The detective frowned.

"In that event, it is very likely that the thief was concealed there and sprang upon him as he entered."

"Impossible! There is no other means of entrance or exit. The three windows are iron-barred and they have not been tampered with. Moreover, the watch shows that he was there at three o'clock. Nothing larger than a mouse could have found shelter in the place."

"Then obviously the murderer followed him into the Greek Room."

"If he had done so," Coram said, "he would have been trapped there this morning when Beale arrived. The door of the Greek Room was locked, and the keys were found *inside* upon the floor!"

"The thief might have carried a duplicate set."

"Quite impossible. But, granting the impossible, how did he get in, since the hall door was securely bolted and barred?"

"We must assume that he succeeded in concealing himself before the museum was closed."

"The assumption is absurd, in view of the fact that Beale and I both examined the rooms last night before I turned the keys over to Conway. However, again granting the impossible, how did he get out?"

The Scotland Yard man removed his cap and mopped his forehead with his handkerchief. "I must say, sir, it is a very strange thing," he acknowledged. "But how about the iron door here?"

"It leads to my own apartments," said Coram. "I alone hold a key. Besides," he added, "it is locked."

He proceeded to prove his point. A brief examination served to show that exit from any of the barred windows would have been impossible.

"Well, sir," said the detective, "if the man had keys he could have come down into the hall and the lower room."

"Step down and look," Coram urged confidently.

The windows of the room on the ground floor were also heavily protected, and it was easy to see that none of them had been opened.

"Upon my word," said the inspector, "it's uncanny! He couldn't have gone out by the hall door, because you say it was bolted and barred on the inside."

"It was," replied Coram, his face grim.

"One moment, sir," interrupted the plain-clothes man. "If that was so, how did *you* get in this morning?"

"It was Beale's custom," said Coram, "to come around by the private entrance to my apartments. We then entered the museum together by the iron door in the Greek Room, and relieved Conway of the keys. There are several little matters to be attended to in the morning before admitting the public, and the other door is never unlocked before ten o'clock."

"Did you lock the door when you came through this morning?"

Coram nodded. "We did. Immediately on finding Conway."

The tension visibly mounted.

"Could anyone have come through this door in the night, provided he had a duplicate key?"

"No. There is a bolt on the private side."

"And you were in your rooms all last night?"

"From twelve o'clock on, yes."

The police looked at one another in tight-lipped silence. Then the inspector gave an embarrassed laugh. "Frankly, sir," he said, "I'm completely puzzled!"

We passed upstairs again, and Coram turned to the doctor. "Have you anything else to report about Conway?" he asked grimly.

"His face is badly cut by broken glass," the doctor replied, "and he seems to have made a desperate effort to defend himself, although, curiously enough, his body bears no other marks of violence. The direct cause of death was, of course, a broken neck."

"Just how do you explain that?"

"I would say that he was hurled upon the floor by a violently enraged man possessing more than ordinary strength!"

The physician had closed his instrument case, and was turning to depart when there came a knocking upon the iron door.

"It is Hilda," said Coram, slipping the key in the lock. "My daughter," he added, turning to the detectives.

II

The heavy door swung open, and there entered a slender, attractive girl of perhaps twenty-three, with the regular features of her father and stylishly bobbed hair that clustered in little golden ringlets about her brow.

She seemed agitated, but her face lighted up when she saw me.

"Good morning, Mr. Searles," she said. "Isn't it dreadful about Mr. Conway?" Then she turned to her father and I saw that she held a card in her hand. "Dad, there's a very singular-looking old man asking to see you."

She handed the card to Coram, who in turn passed it to me. It was that of Douglas Glade of the *Daily Cable,* and upon it was written in Glade's almost illegible calligraphy, the words: *To introduce Mr. Moris Klaw.*

"I suppose it is all right if Mr. Glade vouches for him," said Coram. "But does anybody here know Moris Klaw?"

"I do," replied the Scotland Yard man, smiling shortly. "He's an antique dealer or something of the kind. He's got a ramshackle old place by Wapping Old Stairs—a sort of a cross between Jamrach's and a rag-shop. He's been hanging about the Central Criminal Court quite a bit lately. He prides himself on his ability as an amateur investigator. He's certainly clever," he added grudgingly, "but hard to get along with."

"Ask Mr. Klaw to come in, Hilda," said Coram.

Shortly afterward there entered a strange figure. It was that of a tall man who stooped, so that his apparent height was diminished, a very old man who carried his many years lightly, or a younger man prematurely aged. None could say with any certainty.

His skin had the hue of yellowing vellum, and his hair, his shaggy brows, his scanty beard were each in turn so toneless as to defy classification in terms of coloration. He wore an archaic brown derby, smart, gold-rimmed pince-nez, and a black silk muffler. A long black cape completely enveloped his stooping shoulders, and was folded back in front in Continental fashion.

He removed his hat. "Good morning, Mr. Coram," he said. His voice reminded me of the distant rumbling of empty casks and his accent was wholly indescribable as he turned with a bow to greet the others. "Good morning, Mr. Searles. Your friend, Mr. Glade, told me I should find you here . . . Good morning, Inspector. To Miss Coram I already have said good morning."

From the lining of the flat-topped bowler he took out one of those small, cylindrical scent-sprays which only a lunatic would think of purchasing, and

played its contents upon his high, bald forehead. An odor of verbena filled the air.

He replaced the spray with a frown, and returned both spray and hat to his scantily-thatched head. "There is in all museums a smell of dead men!" he explained. "It is especially noticeable here."

I turned aside to hide my smile, so grotesque was my first impression of the amazing individual known as Moris Klaw.

"Mr. Coram," he continued, "I am an old fool who occasionally has wise dreams. Crime has been a consistent avocation with me for many years. I have seen it upon the Gold Coast, where like the black fever it danced in the air above its victims, and I have seen blood flow in Arctic Lapland, where it was frozen into red ice almost before it could seriously disturb a not too emotional, widely-traveled man. Have I your permission to see if I can help?"

All of us, the police included, were strangely impressed now.

"Certainly," said Coram. "Will you step this way?"

Moris Klaw bent over the dead man. "You have moved him!" he said sharply.

When it was explained that this had been done solely for the purpose of a medical examination he nodded absently, and began scrutinizing Conway. He examined his hair, his eyes, his hands, and his nails. Suddenly to my amazement he rubbed his right forefinger upon the floor beside the body—and actually *sniffed at the dust!*

"Will someone kindly tell me everything that you have discovered and suspect about the case," he said, turning out the dead man's pockets.

Coram briefly recounted what I have previously set down, and replied to the oddly chosen questions which from time to time Moris Klaw put to him. Throughout the dialogue the singular old man conducted a detailed search of every square inch, I think, of the Greek Room.

Before the case containing the harp he stood for a long moment in silence.

"It is here that the trouble centers," he said at last. "What specifically do I know about such Grecian musical instruments? Let me think."

Klaw inclined his head, closing his eyes. "Such valuable curios," he rumbled, "have most fascinating histories—and the crimes they occasion operate in cycles." He waved his hand in a slow circle. "If I only knew the history of this harp, Mr. Coram!"

He glanced toward my friend. "Thoughts are very tangible realities, Mr. Coram. If I might spend a night here—upon the very spot of floor where Conway

fell—I might from the surroundings themselves recover a picture of the thing in his mind"—he gestured toward the still form on the floor—"at the last!"

Klaw paused for an instant, then went on :"What is the precise physical medium which carries a short wave message to our ears, even light itself? It is a huge, subtle, sensitive plate of some sort, and I am convinced it transcends the physical. What you may choose to call bad luck and good luck are simply reflections from it. The supreme thought preceding death is imprinted on the surrounding atmosphere like a photograph. I have trained my mind to reproduce those photographs! May I sleep here tonight, Mr. Coram?"

Somewhere beneath the ramshackle exterior we had caught a glimpse of a man of power. From behind the thick pebbles momentarily had shone out the light of an unusual and original mind.

"I should be most glad of your assistance," said Coram.

"There must be no police officers here tonight," rumbled Moris Klaw. "I'll have no heavy-footed constables filling the room with thoughts of large failures and small ales. They would fog my negative!"

"Can that be arranged?" asked Coram of the inspector.

The Scotland Yard man grimaced, then shrugged resignedly.

"The men on duty can remain in the hall, if you wish it, sir," he said.

"Good!" exclaimed Moris Klaw.

He moistened his brow for the second time with verbena, blowed uncouthly, and shuffled from the Greek Room.

III

Moris Klaw reappeared in the evening, accompanied by a strikingly beautiful brunette, a circumstance which impressed me as constituting a surprising change of face on the part of that remarkable man. "She assists to develop my negatives," he explained. "She is, incidentally, my daughter, Isis."

Grimsby became all attention. Leaving two men on duty in the hall, Coram, accompanied by Moris Klaw, Grimsby, and myself, went up to the Greek Room. Its darkness was now relieved by only a single light bulb.

"I've had the stones in the Athenean harp examined by a lapidary," said Coram. "It occurred to me that they might have been removed and paste substituted. It was not so, however."

"No," said Klaw. "I thought of that, too. Have any visitors been admitted here during the day?"

"The Greek Room has been closed," Coram assured him.

"Very well, Mr. Coram. I do not wish to be disturbed until my daughter comes in the morning."

Isis Klaw placed a red silk cushion upon the spot where the dead man had lain.

"Would you like some pillows and a blanket, Mr. Klaw?" suggested the suddenly attentive Grimsby.

"No," was the abrupt reply. "They would almost certainly be saturated with alien impressions. The thought patterns generated by Conway's last mental emotion must reach my brain unaltered. Good night, gentlemen!"

We withdrew, leaving Moris Klaw to his ghostly vigil.

"I suppose Mr. Klaw is quite trustworthy?" whispered Coram to the detective.

"Oh, undoubtedly!" was the reply. "In any case, he can do no harm. My men will be on duty downstairs all night."

"Were you talking about my father, Mr. Grimsby?" an interested, softly beguiling voice asked from the shadows.

Grimsby turned—and met the flashing black eyes of Isis Klaw. "I was assuring, Mr. Coram," he answered readily, "that Mr. Klaw's methods have several times proved successful."

"Several times!" she said scornfully. "When has he ever failed?" Her accent was certainly French, and her voice, her entire person as certainly charming—to which the detective's manner bore witness.

"I'm afraid I'm not familiar with all his cases, Miss," he said. "May I call you a cab?"

"I thank you, no." She rewarded him with a smile. "Good night!"

Coram opened the doors of the museum, and she passed out.

Leaving the men on duty in the hall, Coram and I took our departure shortly afterward by the main entrance, to avoid disturbing Moris Klaw just beyond the curator's private door.

We went straight to Coram's home, and a half hour later his daughter was serving us coffee in the living room. She seemed tired and emotionally upset. Concluding that the tragedy was responsible I made a remark to that effect.

"Perhaps, to an extent," agreed Coram. "But I fear that she has allowed herself to become over-anxious about her music lessons. She has been studying much too hard, tiring herself out needlessly in order to pass a stiff examination."

Coram and I went over the Greek Room problem from every conceivable standpoint. But neither of us were able to advance a single explanation that did not terminate in a blind alley.

"I don't mind confessing,"

said Coram, "that I am seriously worried. We haven't the remotest idea how the murderer got into the Greek Room nor how he got out again. Bolts and bars, it is evident, are no safeguards. It means we may expect a repetition of the dreadful business at any time."

"What precautions do you propose to take?"

"Well, there will be a couple of policemen on duty in the museum for the next week or so. But after that we shall have to rely upon a nightwatchman."

"Do you think you'll have difficulty in getting a man?"

Coram shook his head. "None at all, fortunately. I know of a very reliable man who needs the job badly."

I hardly slept at all that night, and arrived at the museum well before eight o'clock the next morning. Klaw's daughter and her father were deep in conversation with Coram.

Inspector Grimsby approached me at the entrance of the Greek Room and gestured toward the two men and the girl. "Wait till you hear his mad theory," he whispered.

"Mr. Coram," Moris Klaw was saying in his odd, rumbling voice. "You must believe me when I tell you that my psychic photograph is of a woman—a woman dressed all in white."

I couldn't hear Coram's reply. Grimsby coughed—and flushed as he caught the eye of Klaw's daughter.

"Poor Conway's mind," continued Klaw, "was filled with unreasoning terror when he breathed his last. He was terrified not only by the woman in white, but by the Athenean harp which she carried!"

"Which she *carried?*" exclaimed Coram, incredulously.

"Some woman must have taken the harp from its case a few minutes before Conway died," said Moris Klaw. "We may be able to identify her. I have also some research to do."

He nodded, his eyes now pitch-black, and went on with firmness and conviction. "Yesterday I learned from the constable who was on night duty at the corner of the square that a heavy moving van was seen in the vicinity at four o'clock. It was shortly after four that the tragedy occurred. The driver was unaware, apparently, that there was no way out. I cannot say how important that point may prove to be. But it could supply the key we've been seeking. Meanwhile, we must waste no time. Until you hear from me again I earnestly suggest that you encircle the stand of the Athenean harp with dry plaster of paris each night. Good morning, gentlemen!"

His arm linked in his daughter's, Moris Klaw left the museum.

IV

For some weeks after this mysterious affair all went well at the museum. The new night-watchman, a big Scot named John Macalister, took over the slain attendant's duties, and everything proceeded smoothly.

Not a single new clue concerning the tragedy had come to light, and the police were clearly baffled. From Moris Klaw we heard not a word. But Macalister did not appear to suffer from nervousness, nature having endowed him with the kind of physical strength which customarily gives evil-doers pause.

Poor Macalister! His bulk did not save him from sharing Conway's tragic fate. He was found one morning lying flat on his back in the Greek Room, his features hideously convulsed. And as before the place showed unmistakable signs of a struggle.

The attendant's chair had been dashed against the wall with so great a violence that three of its legs were in splinters and a bust of Pallas that had occupied a corner position upon a marble pedestal had been hurled to the floor, and lay overturned beside the case which usually contained the Athenean harp. The case itself was unlocked, and the priceless antique lay in the center of the room close to Macalister's body.

In other respects the circumstances of the two cases were identical. The door of the Greek Room had remained locked on the inside, and the keys were in plain view on the floor. From the detector-watches in the other rooms it was evident that the tragedy must have taken place at three o'clock or just a little before that hour. Nothing was missing, and the jewels in the harp had not been tampered with.

But—and this was the most amazing circumstance of all—imprinted upon the dry plaster of paris, which, in accordance with the instructions of Moris Klaw had been sprinkled around the case containing the harp, *were the marks of a woman's bare feet!"*

A message was immediately sent through the willing agency of Inspector Grimsby to the Wapping abode of the old curio dealer but Moris Klaw was not there to receive it. He was, in fact, in Paris. His daughter, however, reported having received a letter from her father which contained the words:

"I think it advisable that you warn Mr. Coram immediately to keep the key of the case containing the Athenean harp under his pillow at night."

"What does he mean?" asked Coram. "Is he advising me to detach that particular key from the others or am I to place all of the keys beneath my pillows?"

Grimsby shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know, sir. I should imagine he is referring to just that one key."

"Such an absurd request would convince me the man was an impostor," said Coram, "were it not for the extraordinary confirmation of his theory furnished by the footprints. They certainly looked like those of a woman."

Remembering what Moris Klaw had said about the van previously seen in the vicinity, I sought out the constable who had been on duty at the corner of South Grafton Square on the night of the second tragedy. From him I elicited a fact which, though insignificant in itself, was certainly singular when associated with another circumstance.

A traction engine, drawing two heavy wagons, had been driven completely around the square at 3 A. M., and the driver had clearly been under the impression that he could get out on the other side.

I learned nothing more from the constable, but it served to set me thinking. Was it merely a coincidence that, at almost the exact hour of the previous tragedy, a vehicle of that nature had passed the museum?

"It's not once in six months," the man assured me, "that any vehicle but a tradesman's cart goes round the square. You see, sir, it doesn't lead anywhere. But this chap, he was rattling by before I could stop him. I shouted; he just couldn't hear me, the engine was making such a noise. So I decided to let him drive around and find out for himself. That's usually the wisest course to take, sir."

I now come to the event which concluded this extraordinary case. That it may be clearly understood I must explain the positions which we took up during the nights of the following week, for Coram had asked me to take a night watch with himself, Grimsby, and Beale in the museum.

Beale, the custodian, remained in the hall and lower room—it was catalogued as the Bronze Room. Coram patroled the room at the top of the stairs, Grimsby the next, the Greek Room, and I the Egyptian Room.

None of the doors was locked, and Grimsby, by his own special request, held the keys of the cases in the Greek Room.

We commenced our vigil on Saturday, and I for one found it a lugubrious business. One light was usually left burning in each exhibition hall throughout the night, and I sat as near to it in the Egyptian Room as possible and endeavored to confine my thoughts to the illustrated news weeklies which I had purchased earlier in the day.

In the next room I could hear Grimsby walking about incessant-

ly, and, at regular intervals, the scratching of a match as he lighted a cigar. He was an inveterate cigar smoker.

Our first night's watching accomplished precisely nothing and the five that followed were equally uneventful and monotonous. Upon Grimsby's suggestion we observed great secrecy in the matter, keeping even Coram's small household in ignorance of our intentions.

Grimsby, following out some theory of his own, now determined to dispense altogether with light in the Greek Room. Friday was intensely hot, and the occasional breezes brought with them banks of black thunderclouds. The threatened storm, however, did not break, and up to the time that we took up our posts at the museum no rain had fallen.

At about twelve o'clock I looked out into South Grafton Square and saw that the sky was as heavily overcast as ever, completely obscured, in fact, by a dense mass of inky cloud.

Returning to my chair beneath the lamp, I took up a book of humorous stories by P. G. Wodehouse which I had brought as an effective antidote to gloomy apprehension. As I commenced to read, for the twentieth time, a jovially buoyant tale, I heard the scratch of Grimsby's match in the next room and knew that he had lighted his fifth cigar.

It must have been about one o'clock when the rain came. I heard the big drops on the glass roof, followed by the sudden unleashing of a deluge. For perhaps five minutes it rained steadily, and then the downpour ceased as abruptly as it had begun. Above the noise of the water rushing down the metal gutters, I distinctly heard the sound of Grimsby striking still another match.

Then, with a tremendous crash, the thunder came. Directly above the museum there was a report like a pistol shot, followed by a long-drawn crackling and the glass roof rattled as if a shower of stones had descended upon it.

As the thunder echoed and reverberated hollowly through the building, and the lightning flashed with dazzling brilliance, I leapt to my feet in unreasoning alarm. I had the strange feeling that I was no longer alone, that I was in very great danger. Intermingling with the patter of the rain that now began to fall again, there came a low wailing, like nothing so much as the voice of a patient succumbing to an anesthetic.

It continued a full minute.

There was something both indefinably sweet, and indescribably weird in the low, mysterious music. Not knowing from where it came, I stood motionless, straining my ears in the dark-

ness. Then just as the thunder boomed again I heard a wild cry from the Greek Room. I moved quickly to the door, and threw it open.

The Greek Room was in darkness, but as I entered a vivid flash of lightning illuminated it from floor to ceiling.

I saw a sight which I can never forget. Grimsby lay flat upon the floor by the further door, his left arm bent stiffly down against his side.

But, dreadful as that spectacle was, it scarcely engaged my attention. Nor did I waste a second glance upon the Athenean harp, which lay beside its empty case, between Grimsby and the door.

The figure of a woman, draped in flimsy white, was passing slowly across the Greek Room.

I wanted to scream, but couldn't. How could I doubt that what I saw was a supernatural manifestation? As the darkness came sweeping back I heard a loud, wailing cry, and the sound of a fall.

Then the lightning flashed again and I saw Coram framed in the doorway. Trembling violently, I joined him, and together we stood looking down at Grimsby.

"Good God," whispered Coram. "He's gone. There's nothing we can do."

"Did you—see the woman?" I asked.

Coram shook his head, but as Beale came running to join us, he glanced fearfully into the shadows of the Greek Room.

The thunder had subsided to a dull, continuous rumbling and as we stood around Grimsby's recumbent body we were certain that we were standing in the presence of death.

Suddenly, Coram started violently and clutched my arm. "Searles!" he whispered, "Did you hear that?"

I held my breath and listened. "It's the thunder in the distance," said Beale.

"You're mistaken," I answered. "It's someone knocking at the hall entrance! There goes the bell now!"

Coram gave a sigh of relief. "For a moment I thought—" he shuddered. "Apparently I've no nerves left! We'd better see who it is."

The three of us, keeping very close together, passed quickly through the Greek Room and down into the hall. As the ringing continued Coram unbolted the door, and there, on the steps, stood Moris Klaw!

Some vague idea of his mission flashed through my mind.

"You're too late!" I said. "Grimsby is dead!"

For the barest instant he stared at me in shocked, incredulous horror. Then he darted past us, and vanished up the stairs.

V

Having re-bolted the door, we rejoined Moris Klaw in the Greek Room. He was kneeling beside Grimsby in the dim light, and Grimsby, his face ghastly pale, was sitting up and drinking from a flask.

"I was in time," said Moris Klaw. "He has only fainted!"

"It was the ghost!" whispered the man from Scotland Yard. "My God! I thought I might have to deal with a clever and vicious criminal but when the lightning came and I saw that white thing playing the harp—"

Coram turned aside and was about to pick up the harp when Moris Klaw intercepted him.

"Don't touch it!" he warned. "It is an instrument of death."

Coram started back as though he had been stung, and Grimsby got hastily to his feet.

"Turn up the lights," said Moris Klaw," and I will show you!"

The curator went out to the switchboard, and the Greek Room became brightly illuminated. The stooped, eccentric figure of Moris Klaw seemed suddenly to become invested with a triumphant majesty.

"Watch closely," he said. Slowly, carefully, he raised the harp from the floor. "You see? I am in no danger because I do not take hold of it in a natural manner—*by the top.* I take it by the side! Conway and Macalister grasped it by the top, and died in a matter of minutes."

"Mr. Klaw," said Coram, "I am convinced that this black business is perfectly clear to you, but to me it is a profound mystery. I have in the past picked up the harp in the way you describe and without injury—"

"But not immediately after it had been played upon," interrupted Moris Klaw.

"*Played* upon? I have never attempted to play upon it!"

"Even had you done so you might have escaped, provided you *set it down* before touching the top part."

Moris Klaw nodded, and ran his long white fingers over the golden strings. Instantly there came from the instrument the weird, wailing music which had so startled me in the Egyptian Room.

"And now," he continued, "while I grasp it where the ladies' gold feet join, observe the top closely."

We gathered around him.

"*A needle point,*" he went on impressively, "protruding as you can see, where the hand would *ordinarily* rest in holding it. The player, forewarned, avoids touching it. But whoever takes it from the hand of the player, *dies!* When the harp is again placed upon its base the point again retires.

"The poison will yield to the

most modern laboratory analysis. Aconite it well may be—wolf's-bane. But there were obscurer poisons known to stay potent for generations. We may find it to be a secret buried with the ugly body of Cesare Borgia."

"*Cesare Borgia!*" cried Coram.

"Yes!" rumbled Moris Klaw, "your Athenean harp was indeed made by Paduano Zelloni, the Florentine. It is a clever forgery. I have been in Rome until yesterday, not Paris, as I told my daughter to tell you." He stared at Coram, and nodded.

"Having perfected, with the aid of my daughter, my mind-photograph of the lady who played the harp, I went to Rome to perfect the story of the instrument itself. You see, I have records, of my own at home, but they are incomplete. In Rome, I have a friend, of so ancient a family, that the traditions of renaissance Italy have become to him a matter of family pride.

"He had recourse to the great Vatican library. There he found me an account of just such a harp. In those priceless documents it is called 'a Greek lyre of gold.' Once Lucrezia Borgia may have played upon this very harp. To one who was distasteful to her she might have said, 'Return this harp to its case, my dear.' He does so—and is a dead man."

There ensued a silence, so chill and unnerving that it seemed to be pulling us in a direction where everything was covered with the dust of centuries.

"What caused the harp to play?" asked Coram, in a voice that hardly rose above a whisper.

Moris Klaw looked hard at him. Then a thrill of new horror ran through me. A low moan had come from somewhere hard by.

Coram turned in a flash. "Why, my—my private door is open!" he gasped.

"Where do you keep your private keys?" asked Klaw.

"In my study." Coram was staring at the open door, but he seemed afraid to approach it. "We have been using the attendant's keys at night. My own are on my study mantelpiece now."

"I think now," continued Klaw quietly, "your daughter has them."

"My *daughter!*" cried Coram, and sprang toward the open door. "Hilda!" he called out despairfully. "Hilda!"

"She is somnambulistic," whispered Moris Klaw in my ear. "When certain unusual sounds, such as heavy vehicles at night, reach her in her sleep she arises, and, in common with many sleep-walkers, is drawn toward a well-loved and familiar object—in her case the golden harp."

"She is studying music," I told him.

"I know that. Her brain is overwrought. She goes directly to the case, unlocks it, and strikes the cords of the harp. Then she relocks the door, replaces the keys—I have known many such cases—and retires as she came. Whoever takes the harp from her hands or raises it, if she has by chance laid it down upon its side—dies in horrible convulsions.

"Those dead attendants were both brave fellows. Hearing the music, they came running, saw how the matter stood, and did not awaken the sleeping player. Conway was poisoned as he returned the harp to its case, Macalister, as he lifted it from the floor. Something tonight awoke her before she could relock the door. The fright of that sudden awakening made her faint."

Coram's kindly voice, and the sound of a girl's low sobbing reached us.

"It was my cry of fear, Mr. Klaw," said Grimsby shamefacedly. "She looked like a ghost!"

"I understand," rumbled Moris Klaw soothingly. "I will show you the picture my daughter made from my etheric negative. I saw it, for the first time earlier tonight. It confirmed that Miss Hilda with the harp in her hand was poor Conway's last thought in life."

"Mr. Klaw," said Grimsby earnestly, "you are a very remarkable man!"

He smiled. "I have occasionally thought so," he said and gingerly returned to its case the lyre of gold which Paduano Zelloni had wrought for Cesare Borgia.

From the brown hat he took out his scent-spray, and sprayed verbena upon his heated forehead.

"That harp," he explained, "had the smell of dead men!"

fool proof

by . . . Michael Hervey

In medieval times a sorcerer's apprentice was picked with rare skill. But a modern safe-cracker has to be twice as resourceful.

I SUPPOSE you find it hard to understand why a man in my position, with a steady, well paid job, should feel tempted to commit a crime?

There's nothing strange about it, if you stop to think. What man is ever really satisfied with a lifetime of honest but dull employment? He longs for something a bit more spectacular to break the drab monotony of his days. And money, big money, is the surest means of escape from the humdrum, colorless existence which is the lot of the average working man.

People all have their different ways of trying to obtain such a monetary windfall. Saving up is no good, for it's too slow, and anyway they can't save enough to make it worth their while. What they need is an unexpected, sudden stroke of luck that will change the world for them. Some men dream of a big win on the pools or a lucky treble at the races.

Others seek to make a quick fortune at the gaming tables or

The crime story animated solely by philosophical motives is a rarity in modern imaginative fiction. Perhaps it's a rarity because it does not and can not exist as a clinical entity, if we may borrow a term from the medical fraternity. Rage and greed and bitter frustration always seem to warp the philosophy just a little. So we urge that you read this new story by a gifted Australian writer with an open mind and draw your own conclusions.

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by the purchase of a sweepstake ticket—long chances that seldom come off. But the point I'm trying to make is that, consciously or otherwise, we're all after the same thing, and I'm no exception. It's only our methods that differ.

You can prate about life being what you make it, money not buying happiness, and all that sort of nonsense. But you're no different from the rest of us. I'm ready to swear that if someone were to come up to you right now and offer you thirty or forty thousand pounds you'd grab it with both hands. Yes, even you, and you wouldn't think to ask any questions about where it came from either.

I'm not one to rely upon luck to give me what I want. As I've said, gambling is rarely successful, and never consistently so. At the same time I was utterly determined to amass a large fortune in one way or another. I suppose, if I'd had a flare in that direction, I could have set up in business of some kind, and made a quick fortune.

But I hate buying and selling things. It makes me feel degraded and small to be so dependent on my fellow men that I would have to entice the money out of them by wheedling and servility, to beg where I would like to command.

I decided, quite coolly and calmly, to steal the money. I laid my plans carefully, paying careful attention to every minute detail. And then I bided my time quietly, for years. I knew that I had evolved a scheme that was absolutely fool-proof in every sense of the word. All that was lacking was a suitable opportunity to put it into operation, and that, I felt certain, would turn up sooner or later.

Sure enough, my chance came when Ogden Dracen, one of the richest men in the country, placed an order with my employers for an absolutely burglar proof safe, with price no object. His place had already been broken into twice, and the thieves had each time got clean away with sums exceeding fifty thousand pounds in ready cash, thanks to Dracen's obliging habit of always keeping a great deal of money in the house.

He was firmly of the opinion that the Russians would one day over-run the country, and he felt obliged, therefore, to keep a large sum readily available to enable him to flee the country when the time came.

As chief locksmith I was put to work on the locking mechanism. The safe was the last word in burglar-proof construction. It was a miniature vault in itself, weighing over a quarter of a ton, and being built from a new kind of metal alloy which was a hundred times tougher than steel,

heat resisting and dynamite proof.

I was instructed to fit the most intricate locking device so far invented, to the safe. Naturally when it was completed it was carefully checked by every expert in the place. The Nemo Safe Company has a world-wide reputation for "leaving nothing to chance," and I must in all fairness admit that they do their utmost to live up to their slogan.

What they did not take into consideration on this occasion was the human element, or to put it more crudely, the fact that practically every man has his price. I had my price. It was to be the contents of Ogden Dracen's "burglar-proof" safe.

It was burglar proof to all intents and purposes. What the company didn't know was that I had fixed the mechanism so that in the event of the safe being tipped forward, the locking bolt would slip back, and the door practically open of its own accord. The fault was undetectable unless the whole contraption was tipped forward, and naturally none of the experts judged it a necessary part of their inspection to manhandle a quarter of a ton of metal in that manner.

In any case I doubt if a dozen men pushing at once would have been physically capable of shifting the thing a fraction of an inch along the ground, let alone tilting it at the required angle.

The safe was delivered to Dracen in due course. As is the usual custom, it was left to him to decide upon his own particular code number regarding the combination, a precautionary measure, which made not the slightest difference where I was concerned. He could use the most complicated combination of figures imaginable. I could still get the safe open in a matter of minutes.

The police, I gloated, would be completely at their wits' end when they found that the safe had not been tampered with in any way, or the mechanism forced. They would inevitably assume that it was an inside job of some sort. It was impossible for them to stumble upon the truth, unless, of course, they took it into their heads to tip the safe forward. But since there was no reason for them to do any such thing, I lost no sleep on that score.

My only source of worry was Manny. It would take an incredibly strong person to move the safe into the required position, even with the aid of crowbars and wedges. As you can see I am comparatively puny. Now Manny is as strong as an ox, and every bit as dim-witted. But what made him, above all, the ideal accomplice, was the fact that for some reason he hero-worships me.

He would do absolutely anything in the world for me, if I

asked him, including acting as my accomplice in murder. He was my sister's boy, you know. She and her husband died in an auto accident some years ago, and that is how I came to be saddled with Manny.

I was sure he would prove an able and willing assistant for me in my proposed robbery. But just to be on the safe side, and because he might quite innocently have given the game away, I did not take him into my confidence.

As I've said before, he's pretty stupid anyway, and he swallowed unquestioningly my involved yarn about having been authorized by the firm to go to Ogden Dracen's place, for the purpose of adjusting the mechanism of the safe.

I told him it would be rather a tricky job, and that I would like him to come too, and lend me a hand. The poor kid was highly flattered. I went on to explain that he must not tell a soul anything about it, either before or after, because I was not supposed to take anyone with me.

"It's strictly against the company's rules," I told him. As an additional safeguard, I planned to ship him out to a sheep farm in Australia afterwards.

I had little or no difficulty in getting into Dracen's place, having first ascertained that he was away on a trip of some sort. Being an expert locksmith, it was child's play for me to effect an entrance at one of the back doors.

Warning Manny to make as little noise as possible, I handed him the crowbar and the wedges, explaining exactly what I wanted done. Then I took up my position in front of the safe so that I could get to work on the combination the moment the locking bolt slipped back.

The rest you know. In his stupid enthusiasm Manny exerted too much pressure, with the result that the confounded safe overbalanced completely, and fell on top of me. It was lucky that I saw it coming and stepped back, so that it only landed on my legs, otherwise I wouldn't be alive to tell the tale.

The reason I've told you the whole story from beginning to end, Inspector, is that I want to make it absolutely clear that Manny is innocent and in no way implicated in the robbery. I could cheerfully murder him for the way he messed up things, but I see no reason why he should be punished for something he didn't do.

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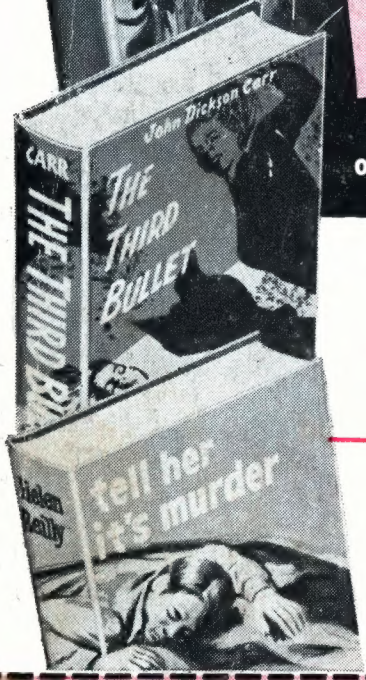

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